

FORGOTTEN REALMS

THE YELLOW SILK



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THE ROGUES, BOOK FOUR

THE YELLOW SILK

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PROLOGUE

Month of Marpenoth, Year of the Tankard (1370 DR)

Timbers groaned and Lady Swan, a caravel out of the port of Telflamm in Thesk, lurched again. Fa Pan lurched with it, slamming hard into a rough wall. Wood scraped the flesh of his arm. He thrust himself back to his feet with the butt of his spear and staggered on along the narrow passage. Sounds echoed down from the deck above. Shouts and screams: the brave sailors of their ship, the foul pirates of the black-sailed hulk that had loomed up out of the cool autumn night. It was impossible to tell who was doing the screaming and who the shouting; the echoing sounds carried only chaos and death.

He knew—the captain knew, all of Lady Swan's crew knew—what the pirates were after. Down in the hold were bales of fine silk and eastern spices, the wealth of a trading expedition. How the pirates had known about the cargo and what route Lady Swan would take across the Sea of Fallen Stars was

another question. The grim set of the captain's mouth had said much. There was a traitor among his crew.

Fa Pan ran. He had been permitted to stay above when the pirate ship was first sighted because of his fighting skill, but his companions, nothing more than merchants, would still be huddled in the cabin where the captain had ordered them to take refuge. If they remained there, they would only be trapped when the pirates came. Better they faced the foul outlaws bravely!

A hatch opened somewhere. Air came rushing through the passage. Another night it might have brought a welcome breath of fresh air. Tonight it brought the smell of death, a worse reek than the usual stifling stench of the ship's bowels. It was cold, too. A sorceress led the pirates, her

spells calling down sleet to sweep the ship's decks and waves of ice to make wood hard and brittle. The fighting above was treacherous, as bad as anything Fa Pan had ever seen in years as a soldier. The pirates barely seemed to notice, but just threw themselves into the struggle in a slipping, sliding frenzy.

They were madmen. Fa Pan didn't know where he and his companions could go to escape them, but fighting had to be preferable to huddling in the dark. "Jen! Weif Te Chien! Yu Mao!" he yelled ahead down the shadowed passage. "Open the door! We need to help! Nung—"

His voice died on his lips. Fa Pan came to a stop so sharp that he nearly tripped over his own feet. There was a dim light ahead, splashing out from around a cabin door that stood ajar. The captain had ordered his companions to keep their refuge dark and their door closed tight. They would not have disobeyed. Fa Pan's stomach rose. He stepped forward silently. Spear ready to thrust, he pushed against the cabin door with one booted foot.

It swung open to carnage as bad or worse than that on deck. The glow of a tiny, magical crystal that Wei prized turned the cabin into a wash of nightmare images. Fallen bodies cast horrid shadows. Blood mingled with the darkness to draw those shadows out into unnatural, oozing, weeping shapes. Almond eyes that had gazed on the splendors of the Great Empire of Shou Lung and the wonders of the Golden Way stared blankly at the rude wood of barbaric Faerûn, far from their home. Fa Pan clenched his jaw. The pirates had already come for the merchants of Shou.

But how? He had passed no one in the passage. Breath hissed between his teeth. The traitor among Lady Swan's crew. Someone could have hidden down here before the attack with the intention of eliminating any resistance from below deck. But if that was the case, then the traitor might— A foot scraped on the floor behind him.

Reflexes trained in the army of the Emperor sent him diving

forward, twisting as he fell to bring his spear up across his body. The weapon jammed in the narrow confines of the doorway, but it was enough. A heavy blade bit into the spear shaft instead of him. Fa Pan kicked out blindly. His foot met flesh and produced a grunt of pain in the shadows. A second lashing kick, though, found only air as his attacker whirled away down the corridor. Fa Pan pulled himself to his feet using his own jammed spear as leverage, wrenched the weapon free, and ran after him. "You!" he shouted. "Stop and face me, murderer!"

He couldn't have said what language he spoke. His mind was clouded by rage. Ahead of him, the killer of his companions thundered down the passage, a vague form just out of spear's reach in the shadows. Fa Pan could see that he was a muscular man, though, a wicked blade clenched tight in each hand. He tried to remember who among Lady Swan's crew might fit that description, but his thoughts could only focus on one thing. Revenge. The big man must have realized that as well; even when the rocking of the ship sent him staggering from side to side, he didn't slow down.

Neither did Fa Pan. As his attacker leaped for the short, steep ladder that led to the deck above, the Shou lunged and thrust. His attacker kicked up, getting out of the way of the spear's sharp point just in time. The move sent him sprawling gracelessly through the hatch, however. Fa Pan snatched back his spear and swarmed up the ladder before his enemy could recover enough to launch a counterstrike. His attacker was rolling over onto his back. Fa Pan stabbed his spear down. "Die, treacherous—"

His spear froze in midthrust. There was light above deck, magic conjured by the pirate sorceress to illuminate the struggle. The radiance was broken by the chaotic, shifting shadows of sailors and pirates, but for the first time, Fa Pan saw the face of his attacker—smooth, noble, almond-eyed. Shou. And familiar.

Fa Pan gaped. "Yu Mao?" he breathed. His colleague, a man

he had traveled with for the months it took to journey from east to west, looked up at him. He was smeared with blood: clothing, arms, hands, weapons—a pair of wide-bladed butterfly swords. Shou weapons. Fa Pan had seen him practicing with them almost every morning! Knotted around his thick neck was a black scarf. Black like the sails of the pirate ship. The traitor hadn't been among the crew of Lady Swan at all.

Fa Pan hesitated.

Yu Mao didn't. Big hands opened, dropping his swords, and reached up to seize the shaft of Fa Pan's spear just behind the head. Shoulders as wide as a westerner's tensed and heaved to the side. Fa Pan's feet slid on a deck still icy from the pirate sorceress's spells even as Yu Mao used the momentum to pull himself up and around. His leg snapped up into Fa Pan's belly from beneath. Air exploded out of Fa Pan's lungs. Gasping, he stumbled back and felt the shaft of his spear slide from his grasp. Yu Mao shouted something in a western tongue. All around them, pirates looked up then jumped back. A tiny childlike figure—one of Faeriin's halflings, though surely the wickedest Fa Pan had ever seen, with one eye covered by a leather patch—called something out in return, but all Fa Pan could understand was Yu Mao's answer.

"He's mine."

His gut twisted. The shaft of his captured spear thrust at him, but Fa Pan managed to dodge back. Yu Mao thrust again. And again, forcing him back across the icy deck. From the corners of his eyes, Fa Pan could see that the battle was almost over. There were more pirates standing than there were sailors. Pockets of combat were dying out; some of the surviving sailors were even starting to throw down their weapons in surrender. They might hope for mercy from the pirates, but Fa Pan couldn't see any hope of mercy from Yu Mao. The other Shou's eyes held the mad glint of bloodlust. Fa Pan gulped air and gasped, "Yu Mao—why?"

His feet hit something soft and heavy. A fallen body. He staggered, tried to recover.

The spear shaft cracked against his side then snapped up against the underside of his arm. Numbing pain washed through him. It was all he could do to stay upright and stumble back a few more slippery paces. His attacker stalked after him, spinning the spear around sharply and reversing it in his grasp. Before Fa Pan could dodge, Yu Mao lunged. Fire lanced through Fa Pan's shoulder. The force of the blow knocked him back; he slammed into the ship's rail then jerked forward a step as Yu Mao ripped the spear back out of his flesh.

Fa Pan gasped against the shock. His good arm groped for the rail to hold him upright. He managed to focus on Yu Mao. His former colleague was surrounded by pirates, just another one of their number. "Why?" Fa Pan choked. Yu Mao spat.

"You wouldn't understand." He lunged again, spear out.

Fa Pan threw himself backward onto the ship's rail— over the ship's rail. For a heartbeat, it felt as if he were balancing on the narrow wood, caught by hands of the spirits between ship and sea. Then the balance shifted and he fell.

He hit the water hard and sank deep. Light vanished, choked off by the night and the dark water. Already cooling with the season, the water had been further chilled by the sorceress's spells. The shock of it stung his wound and he screamed, a lungful of air exploding into a cloud of pale bubbles. The cold brought a kind of calm as well, though, a soothing, weightless suspension. Fa Pan hung there for a moment, eyes half-closed, mind half-dazed, as the last of his air trickled away.

And when his lungs ached with emptiness, he opened his eyes, gazed up at the glow of the sea's surface, and drew in cold water.

Family legend held that his great-great grandmother, a famous beauty, had attracted the notice of a spirit of the bright little river that ran through her hometown. Her

dalliance with the spirit had not been long, but it had brought the touch of the spirits to her bloodline—a touch that included the ability to breathe water as easily as air. Fa Pan hadn't made much of the strange ability since he had been a child; most of the time, it was easier to live without revealing himself as one of the spirit folk. Certainly he had never told Yu Mao. That ignorance was probably the only reason the murdering traitor had let him get as close to the rail as he had before striking. Fa Pan was safe in the water—for the moment, anyway.

He kicked his feet, propelling himself back up to the surface, and lifted his head cautiously into the air. The sounds coming from the ship's deck now were shouts of triumph, punctuated only briefly by wails from the survivors. The battle was over. The pirates had won. Yu Mao still stood beside the rail, as if surveying the results of his treachery. He wasn't alone for long. A second figure joined him—the pirate sorceress. The two embraced. Fa Pan recognized her now. He had seen Yu Mao with her and that wicked-looking halfling in Telflamm! Traitor to Lady Swan, traitor to his companions, traitor to Shou Lung—for the love of a woman? He choked back a groan.

Yu Mao had been right. He didn't understand. But if Yu Mao had wanted to destroy everything and everyone that might send news of his treachery back to his homeland, he hadn't quite succeeded.

Trying to board Lady Swan again or to sneak aboard the pirate vessel would be suicide. He was wounded and the pirates had him outnumbered. There was no way he could exact retribution on Yu Mao himself. The goods of the trade expedition were only silk and spices—losing them was nothing. His life and his witness to Yu Mao's treachery were more important. There were those who had to be told of what happened here. The choice between shame and retribution would be theirs.

Fa Pan let himself sink back into the comfort of the water.

They had glimpsed the northern coast of the Sea of Fallen Stars earlier in the day. His wounded arm dragging awkwardly, Fa Pan began the long struggle for shore.

CHAPTER 1

Month of Hammer, Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)

The door of the Wench's Ease slammed open without warning—slammed open so hard that it almost tore off its worn hinges. A crowd came pouring out of the tavern and into the cold winter night. No, not a crowd. A mob. Women and men, fishing folk of Span-deliyon, shouting loud enough that the screams of the thin man being dragged roughly out of the Ease were barely audible. "No!" he pleaded. "No! It was an accident! It was an accident, I swear—"

His screams ended in a thick grunt as someone punched him hard in the gut. A cheer went up from those closest to him. Those farther away muttered their disappointment and tried to push closer. In the crush, the mob's victim twisted free and made a desperate break for freedom, dropping to the slush and mud of the ground and trying to scramble away between his tormentors' legs. He didn't get far. The mob surged around him, kicking and stomping. Tycho Arisaenn, curly black hair on his head and

three days' of dark stubble on his face, slipped through the crowd and up to the door of the tavern. Most of the Ease's customers were outside now—the sole occupant of the doorway was a broad-hipped matron who leaned against the doorpost with a sour look on her face. Those few customers still inside yelled at her to close the door and stop letting the cold in. She ignored them. Tycho slid up to her. "Olore, Muire," he said, rubbing his hands together. Even inside thick mittens, his fingers were chilled. "Quiet night?"

The woman spat into the muck.

Screams turned into shrieks. Tycho turned to look. The mob's victim was up again, bloody but still struggling. Six pairs of arms held him firmly, though, and bore him aloft through the crowd to the massive, old tree that stood in the yard outside

the Wench's Ease. Tycho's breath hissed through his teeth as he realized what they meant to do. He took a step forward, but Muire's heavy hand snapped out and grabbed the leather of his coat.

"It's too late," she said.

"Rope!" called someone. "Get rope!"

"Here!" A coil came hurtling out of the mob. Practiced hands caught it and looped it quickly then threw the looped end up and over a thick, scarred branch. Someone else grabbed it as it fell back down. The screaming man was thrust forward and the noose cinched tight around his scrawny neck. He looked up, eyes wide.

"Mercy!" he gasped. "Give me Tyr's justice!"

The woman cinching the noose slapped a rough hand across his face. "It's dockside justice for you, Ardo, and may your traitorous soul sleep tight in Umberlee's cold arms! A man who would turn on a mate deserves no better!"

Ardo's protests vanished into the roar of the crowd as the woman stepped back and snapped one arm into the air. Four burly men hauled sharply on the free end of the rope and Ardo was wrenched up to dance with the snowflakes on the night wind. A cheer went up with him. The front ranks of the mob darted forward to yank on his kicking legs with arms muscled by days of hauling nets and pulling oars, hastening Ardo's ignominious departure from the world. The men and women who couldn't get close enough to participate yelled encouragement and toasted their triumph with tankards of the Ease's dark ale.

Muire sucked on her teeth and glowered. Tycho glanced sideways at her. "What happened?"

Muire snorted. "Word is that Ton didn't just fall overboard from his and Ardo's boat last tenday. His body finally washed up today. His throat had been slit. Nobody could have done that but Ardo." She jerked her head at the mob and the skinny man's swinging body. "Bad night for him to come drinking."

"Bind me." Tycho tucked his hands up into his armpits and frowned. Off at one edge of the mob, a small cluster of men stood by themselves. At the heart of their cluster was a lanky thug in a dark-red tunic, a heavy fur mantle over his shoulders for warmth. Tycho nodded at them. "Lander's here, Muire."

"A man can drink where he wants. Even Lander."

Tycho gave her a thin smile. "Did you know that he and Ton had a ... let's say a 'common friend' who wasn't too happy when Ardo didn't want to pick up Ton's debts? Has Lander been doing much talking tonight?"

"Some," said Muire in a quiet voice.

"Funny coincidence, Lander and rumor both coming 'round to the Ease tonight," observed Tycho. "With both Ardo and Ton gone, I wonder who'll be taking their boat."

Brawny arms came up and folded across Muire's broad chest. "You might want to keep that sort of thinking to yourself, Tycho, or Ardo won't be the only one on the tree. I wouldn't want to lose a good musician and a good customer in one night."

"That's a lovely sentiment."

"Ardo left an unpaid account."

"How much?"

"Enough that I wouldn't have minded a piece of his boat, too." Muire uncrossed her arms and stepped back into the smoky warmth of the tavern. Tycho followed—or at least started to. "Where do you think you're going?" asked Muire.

"Inside where it's warm. It's cold out here, Muire!"

"It's where your audience is." An arm swept around the dim interior of the Wench's Ease. "I can't pay you if I've got no customers and right now they have other things on their minds. Get the crowd back in and you can come with them."

"You're not going to have a good musician for long if my fingers fall off from frostbite!" protested Tycho. He started forward. Muire thrust him back. Tycho gritted his teeth.

"Fine," he said. "You want them calm?"

"No. I want them drinking."

The door slammed in his face. Tycho gave it a swift kick that set the old wood shuddering and turned around. A few people on the edge of the mob were already looking at him. Tycho fought back a growl and gave them a smile instead. "Back inside. You heard the lady. Or at least you heard Muire and she's as close to a lady as you'll find at the Wench's Ease!"

It was an old line, but it got a laugh. A couple of people started to look longingly at the Ease's closed door. The rage that had sustained the crowd was fading fast with Ardo dead. "That's right," Tycho told them, "nice and warm in there." Hammer was a month better spent indoors and by a fire than outside on a cold night. It wouldn't, he guessed, take much to remind everyone of that. He shook off his mittens and stuffed them in his belt then tugged on the wide leather strap that ran over one shoulder and across his chest. The chunky curved box of his strilling slid around from where it hung behind his back. Tycho settled the instrument in his left arm—its butt against his shoulder, its long neck in his curled hand—with practiced ease and undipped the short bow from the strap with his right hand. The strilling would be out of tune in the cold, but this wasn't going to be a fine performance. He set the bow against the instrument's deepest string and drew it slowly across.

The sound that echoed out of the strilling's wooden body howled like a winter storm coming in off the Sea of Fallen Stars. It got everyone's attention immediately.

The people closest to the sound moved back a pace out of sheer surprise. Tycho stepped forward. He wasn't a tall man and most of the mob gathered outside the tavern stood a good head above him. Physical size, however, wasn't the only measure of a person's presence. "A dark night for dark deeds, friends," Tycho called. Pitched to carry, his voice rang out in the night. He walked on and the crowd parted before

him, giving way before the simple force of his confidence. Tycho met the glance of each man and woman with a somber look. "A man who turns on his friends is no man at all. A man who would kill his friends is a monster."

He pushed the bow across a different string. The howling storm turned into a haunting moan, a forlorn wail that slid up and down in pitch as Tycho shifted his fingers on the strilling's neck. More than one head in the crowd looked up at the body hanging from the tree. Tycho paused under it and looked up as well. "Ardo, you stupid bugger," he murmured under the music. The dockside of Spandeliyon was not a good place to fall on the wrong side of rumor. The voice of the strilling changed again and soared up into the night before fading away. In its wake, the mob—no, the crowd—was silent. Even Lander and his men, Tycho saw with a satisfied glance, were quiet.

He let the silence hold for just moment longer then sent his bow dancing across the strilling's strings once more. This time, though, he rattled out a wild tune. Something to get feet tapping and put minds in memory of happier things—like Muire's ale. He'd had enough of the cold. "Now who'll join me in drinking to Ton?" he called. "A murdered soul needs the company of a toast or two from the people who loved him best!" He took a turn through the crowd, giving people a nudge in the direction of the Ease. "He was your friend, Det." Tycho elbowed someone else. "And you, Rana. Brenal, I remember you and Ton hoisting more than a few together!"

He worked the edges of the crowd like a herding dog. Slowly, people began to move back into the tavern. The ground was a treacherous churned surface in their wake, but Tycho danced back and forth across it, bow on strilling keeping perfect time. His calls turned into a patter, rolling off his tongue. "Ervis. Pitch. Blike. Come on, inside with all of you. Drink one for Ton and remember an old mate. Sing a song for him. Umbero, you were his friend. You, too—" Tycho turned

around one more time and found himself face to chest with a dark-red tunic. He looked up to the raw-boned face above it and finished smoothly "—Lander."

The thug smiled like a shark. "Oh yes," he said. "Like two peas in a pod we were." A couple of the men who stood with him laughed.

Tycho returned the smile. "Like two dice in a cup," he added, "or two fish in a net." His bow paused for a moment on the strilling. "No, forgive me. Two fish in a net would have been Ton and Ardo."

Lander's eyes narrowed. "You want to watch what you say about dead people."

"I never say anything ill of the dead." Tycho's smile narrowed as well. "The living, on the other hand, are another matter." He sent new sound rippling from his instrument and spun around to usher the last of the crowd back into the Wench's Ease. "Come in and drink, Lander," he called back. "You owe Ton that."

He didn't wait to see if Lander took up the gauntlet, but just followed the stragglers through the door and into the tavern. Warm air embraced him like a lover and he gasped with relief. The crowd had already settled back into their familiar places, filling the Ease almost completely. Many already had more ale in their hands and Muire's serving women were scrambling to keep up with the demands of those who didn't. Tycho let the strilling slide down from his shoulder and wove his way through to the bar. "There you go, Muire," he said, tugging open his coat and loosening his scarf. "Your customers are back again and drinking. Now how about a hot one?"

On the other side of the smoke-darkened wood counter, Muire grunted and turned to draw a tankard of ale from a cask. "You've got the gift," she admitted grudgingly.

"What was that, Muire?" asked Tycho in a mock shout over the noise of the tavern's patrons. "I didn't quite catch it."

"Don't try me, Tycho. Just because you've been traveling

doesn't make you a wit. I still remember when you were just another Spandeliyon dock rat, squeaking out songs for a copper and getting into trouble." The tavern door opened again, letting in another gust of cold air. Muire glanced up and her gaze hardened. "Some things don't change."

Tycho twisted around to follow her glare. The Ease's door was just closing behind Lander and his men. The thugs began making their way around the outside of the room to a table—hastily vacated by the customers who had been occupying it—close to the big stone fireplace. Lander gave Tycho a harsh stare. The curly haired man just turned back to Muire. "No," he said, "I guess they don't."

"What did you say to him?" asked Muire.

"Nothing that he'd understand," Tycho told her with a crooked grin.

Muire shook her head. She took a stout iron from a rack over a brazier and plunged it into the tankard of ale. The iron hissed and the ale seethed briefly. Muire passed the tankard across the bar. Tycho shifted strilling and bow into one hand and raised the warm drink with the other. "To Ton and Ardo," he said quietly. Muire retrieved a tankard of her own and clacked it against his.

Tycho barely had a mouthful of ale down his throat, though, before there was a shout from the tavern floor. "Hoy, bard! How about a song?" Tycho gave Muire another crooked grin.

"No, things don't change, do they?" He set his tankard down and shrugged out of his coat then turned around, settling his strilling back against his shoulder. "All right, Rana, you want a song?" He rubbed his bow against the strings of the strilling. "Here's one I learned in Suzail, all the way west in Cormyr—"

"No fussy western songs!" Rana pounded her fist on the table. "Play us a proper Altumbel tune! Something we can sing along with!" More shouts joined hers. Tycho smiled.

"Fine with me, Rana. If you sing, people will throw me coin to drown you out!" Laughter washed around the room and

Tycho sang out. "Old Raren had a daughter fair, a pretty maid with golden hair, and her heart was full of good until she met—"

"—the king of piiiirrates!" bawled the crowd. Tycho laughed and began to play.

Partially obscured by a veil of cloud and silvery streams of snow blowing down from on high, the moon cast pale light across the shacks, storehouses, and tenements of the Spandeliyon waterfront. The silhouettes of taller houses and a solid fortress stood a short ways inland, away from the stinking docks, but the town was quite obviously an unplanned jumble. Its buildings were like driftwood cast up on shore by the near-constant sea wind, ready to be scoured away by the next storm.

How Spandeliyon managed to survive storms was, in fact, almost puzzling—from farther out on the Sea of Fallen Stars, the whole of the peninsula of Altumbel presented a profile not that dissimilar to a barely submerged reef.

Kuang Li Chien drew the heavy quilted wool of his waitao coat more tightly around himself and watched the docks of the town draw closer. The small crew of the fat little ship on which he had taken passage scrambled around him, making the ship ready for docking. Up near the bow, the captain was shouting at the shore. After a moment, a door opened in one of the shacks on the dockside. A stout figure emerged in a flood of warm light and stumped up to the edge of the dock to squint into the dark and shout back. Li narrowed his eyes and listened, picking out the foreign words.

"Steth? Steth, is that you, you old—" The trade language of the west was simple enough, but some of it still gave Li difficulty. He couldn't quite understand the phrase that the dockmaster used, but he guessed that it was not very flattering. "What are you doing? Daylight not good enough for you or have you gone back to your old habits?"

The ship's captain replied with a rapid string of curses, most of which Li also missed. He understood the captain's final words well enough, though. "—passenger who wouldn't let me rest until we docked!"

"A passenger for Spandeliyon?" asked the dockmaster. "At this time of year?" Captain Steth's response was another incomprehensible rattle of blasphemy that sent the dockmaster running into his shack. He emerged with a torch, shouted back at the captain, and began lighting lanterns at the dockside. The ship turned, slowing to a glide in the icy black water. Li swayed with the heavy bump as it nudged against the dock. A rope was thrown down to the dockmaster, who looped it around a mooring post, and the ship swayed out then shifted back, restrained. More ropes were thrown down and made fast, and slowly the ship settled into a gentle rise and fall beside the dock. A port in the ship's rail was swung open and a gangplank run out. Li picked up his pack and made his way over to the plank and down onto the dock. None of the crew got in his way.

Steth was already down and talking to the dockmaster. Both men looked up as Li stepped into the lantern light. The dockmaster's eyes went wide then narrow, and he shot a glance at the captain. "You didn't say he was an elf! Bringing an elf-blood to Spandeliyon? You are mad!"

Li's jaw tightened. His smooth skin, fine features, and tapered eyes had earned him this reaction elsewhere in the west, though not with this hostility. The captain saved him from having to explain himself—he dealt the dockmaster a sharp blow to the back of his head. "He's not an elf!" he hissed. "Haven't you ever seen a Shou before, Cul?"

The dockmaster managed to look startled once more. "From Thesk? Like one of those eastern Tuigan horde riders?"

Li drew a sharp breath, stood straight and returned the dockmaster's gaze. "I am not a barbarian," he said, forming the thick syllables carefully. "I come from the Great Empire of Shou Lung." More eastern, he added silently, than your

uncivilized mind could possibly comprehend and far greater than you could believe. "I require directions. I need to find a wine shop."

"What?" Cul glanced at Steth once more, but this time the captain shrugged and shook his head. The dockmaster looked back to Li and licked his lips. "No wine shops here," he said slowly and with great volume as if that would make him easier to understand. "No wine shops. There is a wine merchant in—"

The dockmaster used a word Li didn't recognize, but pointed in the direction of the tall houses and fortress Li had seen from the ship. The wealthier part of Spandeliyon. A wine merchant for the rich people, Li guessed. He frowned.

"No," he said. He spoke clearly, but kept his voice at a normal pitch. Let this old goat sound like a backward fool if he insists, he told himself, but I will not! "Not a wine shop." He searched his memory for the proper word. "A taven."

"Ataven?" The dock master blinked. "Oh, a taverf. The man tried to hide an unpleasant smile and failed miserably. Li frowned again. He swept the wide sleeve of his waitao aside and undipped the scabbard that hung at his belt. He held it loosely, casually, but making certain that Cul could see both it and the protruding hilt of the heavy, curved dao within. If the man's empty eyes had gone wide before, they practically bulged out of his head now. His hand twitched for a knife sheathed at his belt, but Steth caught his arm.

"Yes," said Li calmly. "A tavern."

The captain answered for the dockmaster. "You could have asked me," he growled. Li just gave him a blunt glance. Steth grunted. "Fine." He nodded to his left. "Go that way and you'll find the Eel." He nodded right. "That way is the Wench's Ease."

There was an unspoken warning in his voice: both taverns were dangerous places. Li wouldn't have expected any less.

"Which one is most close?" he asked. Steth shrugged.

"Both about the same."

A cautious man lets his weapon precede him, Li thought. He gestured with his sword hand—to the right. "This one, this 'wencheese'—how will I find it?"

"Wench's Ease," the captain corrected him. "Walk until you find a tree. It's the only one in dockside. There's a sign."

"I don't read your language."

Cul found his voice. "Don't need to. There's a picture of pretty wench on the sign," he said in a greasy tone. "You'll see that."

"If I don't," Li told him, "I will come back and you can guide me yourself." He turned right and began to walk.

Behind him, he heard the dockmaster mutter, "Arrogant bastard, isn't he?"

"Cul, you don't know the sweet chum half of it," answered the captain.

Li didn't look back, but just stared into the shadows ahead and let their voices fade behind him. His scabbard he kept out and ready. The cramped streets seemed empty, but that could change all too quickly. Spandeliyon was so far proving itself to be nothing more than he had expected—nothing more than he had been warned to expect. He clenched his teeth. The surface of the street under his boots was barely frozen mud, treacherous in the thin moonlight. He should, he supposed, be grateful for the cold. It killed whatever stench might have oozed out of the mud in warmer weather and kept the people of the town indoors by their smoking fires.

In that, at least, he actually found himself envying them. A fire would be a blessing. As, he thought, would a torch. He should have demanded one of the sniveling dockmaster. But then again, he should also have asked more about the picture on the sign he sought. "Wench," he murmured to himself, trying to puzzle out the meaning of the word.

The snow was beginning to fall more thickly by the time the street opened up into a small courtyard and Li spotted the tree the captain had mentioned. It was actually much larger

than he had been expecting, an old giant stripped naked by winter. A small knot of figures clustered around its base, two of them holding up a third. Li almost called out to them for directions before one of them shifted and he saw what they were doing. The third man had been hung from the tree's branches—the other two were busy stealing his boots. And his stockings. And his pants. Li sucked in a sharp breath of disgust.

The thieves must have heard him. One looked up, yelped at the sight of an armed man, and slapped his partner. Both fled, leaving the dead man turning slowly in the cold air, pants dangling loose around his knees. Li averted his eyes as he passed.

Only one of the buildings around the tree bore any sign at all. Not that a sign seemed truly necessary—light and song seeped through gaps around the door. Some of the light splashed across the sign above as well, revealing a lurid painting of a laughing woman so buxom she almost spilled out of her bodice. Li guessed that he had found out what "wench" meant. He averted his eyes again, shifting his gaze to the ground, apparently the only safe place, to look.

It wasn't. The snow and muck between tree and tavern had been churned up, as if by many feet. The hanged man's killers had emerged from under the sign of the wench. His hand squeezed the scabbard of his dao and he glanced up briefly at the corpse dangling from the tree. "May the Immortals grant me better luck in this place than they did you," he said. He reached out and opened the tavern door.

There was nothing better than a good song to loosen hearts—and more important, Tycho thought, throats. He grinned to himself as he sawed his bow across the strilling. The dark ale of the Wench's Ease was flowing as smooth as bait on a hook. Even Lander and his men were drinking and singing along with the tavern regulars. Muire and her serving maids were busier than they had been in a tenday and if Muire was happy enough at the end of the night, there might even be a

little extra coin for him. All he needed to do was keep the mood up. "How about another?" he bellowed over the din, A cheer came back to him. Tycho sent a ripple of music dancing out from the strilling then scraped the bow slowly, drawing the crowd's attention to him. "Ahhh," he rasped sadly as his audience fell quiet, "the wizards of Thay, they have a way with magic and with spells. They shave the hair on their head and they dress all in red, and they're dour like clams in their shells."

The bow scratched a string for emphasis. A few people laughed and Tycho flashed them a smile. "But there's a reason they're bald-ed, and dress like they're scalded and all have the humor of rocks." He paused and the crowd leaned forward in anticipation. "That isn't a pimple... " He winked at one of the serving maids. " .. you see on their ... dimple... "

"It's pox!" he yelled and the crowd joined in, banging tables and singing lustily. "It's pox, it's pox, they've got the Thayan pox!"

Tycho strutted out into the middle of the floor and spun around to the shouts of the crowd, playing fast and hard. "Well, there's Thayan pox in every port, in sailor's shack and prince's court—"

"The pox, the pox, they've got the Thayan pox!"

"When'ere you see a wizard itch, you know what is that makes 'em twitch!"

"The pox, the pox, they've got the Thayan pox!"

In Tycho's head, the trickle of coins that Muire usually doled out at the end of the night was turning into a small flood. He laughed. "Even temples aren't safe anymore," he sang, "you never know who walked through that door!" He swept out his arm and pointed his bow at the Ease's own rickety portal —

—which opened.

For one moment, the slightest fraction of a heartbeat, the crowd—and Tycho—paused. Framed in the tavern doorway was a tall man dressed in a long quilted coat of blue wool.

Snow clung to his shoulders and to the fur-edged cap that he wore. If the snow bothered him, however, there was no trace of it in his travel-tanned, fine-boned face. He stood straight as a mast, stern and dignified.

For a moment.

"The pox!" howled the crowd in perfect time. "The pox! He's got the Thayan pox!"

The stranger's mouth drew a thin line across his face.

It wasn't clear who in the crowd laughed first. It simply started and spread, sweeping through the tavern like a storm until everyone was hooting and guffawing. Tycho tried to fight it off but couldn't. Laughter rose from his belly and forced its way out of him. He barely managed to get his bow back to the strilling and scratch out the last bars of the song before doubling over in helpless mirth.

The only people in the place not laughing were the stranger and Muire. The stranger stepped into the tavern, slamming the door shut behind him, and stalked over to the bar. Muire gave Tycho a fierce look. The bard

swallowed a laugh and reached out to the stranger as he passed. "Olore, friend," he choked. "Welcome to the Wench's Ease." He couldn't hold back a crooked smile. "The merriest tavern in Spandeliyon."

The stranger twitched away from his hand as though Tycho carried the Thayan pox himself. "Leave me, singer," he said in a thick accent and walked on.

At the nearest table, Rana's laughter turned into an ugly snort. "Arrogant elf-blood," she spat at the stranger's retreating back.

"He's not elf-blood, Rana," Tycho told her, straightening up. "He's a Shou."

"Elf, Shou—you don't see much of neither in Spandeliyon."

"No," agreed Tycho, "you don't." He nodded distracted acknowledgment as others in the crowd shouted for another song, but didn't raise his strilling again. Instead, he turned and went after the stranger.

The Shou was just stepping up to the bar. Tycho gave him a surreptitious examination as he approached. The Shou was tall, lean, and stiff, a sturdy doorpost of a man. The pack he carried slung over one shoulder was large and heavy. The wool of his coat was dusty, dirt muting the fine blue of the quilted fabric. It was fraying slightly along the hem and at the cuffs and elbows. Unless he missed his guess, the man had come a long, long way. Clipping his bow to the strap of his strilling and shifting the instrument around to ride on his back once more, Tycho bellied up to the bar beside him. The Shou glanced at him out of the corner of his almond-shaped eyes.

"I said leave me, singer. I do not want a song." The Shou man turned away as if Tycho were already gone from his mind and set a scabbard containing a heavy Shou saber on the bar. He looked to Muire. "A clean cup with good wine or pale ale." He set some coins on the bar.

Sembian copper pennies. A scant price for a mug of ale in another port, but just right for dockside Spandeliyon. The man, Tycho judged, was an experienced traveler.

Muire glanced down at the pennies, not even blinking at the saber beside them. "A clean cup I can give you," she said, "but we only have dark ale here." The Shou nodded and Muire turned away to the ale casks. Conversation in the tavern was returning to normal, laughter dying out to be replaced by the usual hum and murmur. Much of it, Tycho was fairly certain, would be about this unusual visitor.

The Ease's patrons were whetting their appetites for a good story and, bind him, he'd be the one to give it to them! He leaned in. The Shou fixed him with an angry glare, but Tycho didn't back away. Instead he smiled at him. "You've come to a poor town on a cold night, honored lord," he said in the musical Shou tongue.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the stranger's eyes widen ever so slightly in surprise. "You speak Shou," he replied in the same language.

"A little bit," Tycho told him modestly. "You aren't the only traveler here. I had the pleasure of spending some time in the Shou town of Telflamm in Thesk and learned your language there."

The stranger nodded. "Ah," he said. He looked directly at Tycho. "That would explain why you speak it like a lisping whore from Ch'ing Tung."

Blood rushed to Tycho's face. He opened his mouth, a stinging insult rising to his lips, but Muire cut him off before he could deliver it. "Your ale, sir," she said, setting a tankard down before the Shou—and one before Tycho

as well, foamy, thick, and hastily drawn. "And yours." The Shou man picked up his tankard and nodded to her. When Tycho reached for his own, though, Muire gave the tankard a shove that sent foam slopping onto his hand and sleeve.

"Let it go," she hissed. "I don't know what you're saying to him, but I can read faces as well as anyone." "Muire—"

"I've had enough trouble tonight. Apologize to him!"

Growling, Tycho took a deep swig of ale and glanced over at the Shou. The man seemed to have forgotten him already. He was scanning the crowd of the tavern, holding his ale but not actually drinking it. There was a look of deep intensity on his face. Though any number of the Ease's patrons were staring at him, he didn't appear to make eye contact with any of them. Lost in his own haughty world, Tycho thought balefully. He gulped some more ale—and swallowed his pride with it. He leaned over toward the Shou. The man's gaze snapped back to him immediately with the experience of a trained fighter. Tycho realized that he held his tankard in his left hand. One swift move would have his right around the grip of his saber. Tycho stayed still, as if absolutely nothing were wrong. "I'm sorry if my feeble attempts at Shou have offended you, sir." In spite of the stranger's insult, he stuck with the language. "My name is Tychoben Arisaenn, but everyone calls me Tycho. May I know your name?"

The Shou's mouth twitched into a narrow frown. "My

surname is Kuang and my personal name is Li Chien and if you insist on addressing me again, you will go to the gates of the afterlife with that name upon your lips."

This time, Tycho actually choked. Heckling, even dismissal—those were one thing. He could deal with them.

He had dealt with them, in taverns all around the Sea of Fallen Stars from Spandeliyon to Suzail, Procampur to Arrabar, and back again. Blunt intimidation, on the other hand, was something else. His jaw clenched. "You might want to have a care, Master Kuang. Threats aren't taken lightly around here."

"That's wise," the Shou replied. "A man should take seriously every threat made to him—as well as every threat that he makes himself."

Both of his hands were still, right open to seize his blade, left steady and ready to toss his tankard. Tycho had been through enough tavern brawls to recognize the body language. Behind him, he heard Muire curse quietly. "Tycho ... " she said with low warning.

Her words seemed to echo. The Wench's Ease had suddenly grown quiet, Tycho realized, the hint of violence drawing every eye. Tycho ignored both Muire and the stares of the crowd. "What do you want here, Master Kuang?" he asked, abandoning attempts at Shou. "If you want trouble, you didn't have to travel so far."

The change in language seemed to give the stranger pause. He blinked and his frown grew deeper as he noticed the attention of the crowd as well. He straightened up and looked out at all of the Ease's patrons.

"I am looking for a man," he announced in his thick accent. "A man who was a pirate."

Tycho's lips curved up and he snickered—then laughed. So did the crowd. For the second time that night, laughter washed through the Ease. Unlike the first time, however, there wasn't anything good-natured about it. Tycho gave the Shou a thin smile. "Master Kuang, have you heard of

Aglarond? It's the country to the northeast of Altumbel. Its ruler is the Simbul. The WitchQueen. She doesn't like pirates and she doesn't have much mercy for the ones that she catches off her coasts. There have been a lot of pirates recently who decided it would be better if they were to stay away from Aglarond and take up a more peaceful profession. Like fishing. In Spandeliyon."

He nodded out to the crowd. A good number of the Ease's patrons—a very large number—opened their mouths in gap-toothed grins.

The Shou said nothing. Tycho wondered if the man had followed what he had just said. "Master Kuang?"

I understand," the Shou said narrowly. He stood stiff and said in words that sounded carefully practiced, "The man I'm looking for is a one-eyed hin—a halfling—who was mate on a ship called the Sow. His name—then—was Brin."

Laughter died instantly. Grins disappeared. Even Tycho felt his anger drain away. "Master Kuang...."

Kuang Li Chien gave him a sharp glare. To the crowd, he said, "I will reward anyone who takes me to Brin. I have business with him."

For a moment, no one moved. Then a chair scraped back. "I'll take you to Brin," called a voice.

Lander stood up.

Breath caught in Tycho's throat. He glanced at the Shou. The man was giving Lander a measured look that turned into a curt nod. "Very well." He twisted around and set his tankard, still full, on the bar. As he picked up his saber, Tycho caught his eye and tried to give him a slight shake of his head, a silent warning. Kuang Li Chien just pressed his lips together and turned away. "I will give you the reward when we find Brin," he said to Lander.

"Fair enough." Lander adjusted his mantle and walked over to the door. A box beside it held cheap torches for patrons who needed them. Lander flipped a coin into the box and took one, holding it over a candle to light it. In only

a moment, the torch was burning and a wreath of smoke surrounded Lander. He opened the door. Cold air and snow gusted inside. "After you," he said.

"No," insisted Kuang Li Chien, "I will follow you." Lander shrugged and stepped out into the night. The Shou followed him without a backward glance.

The door slammed shut on a silent tavern. No one said anything—at least none of the Ease's regular patrons. At the table Lander had just abandoned, his men began snickering and jostling each other as they rushed to drain their tankards. After a few long moments, they rose and walked out the door as well. Once they were gone, Tycho blew out a long breath. "Bind me," he murmured. He lifted his tankard to his lips, gulped the bitter ale, and turned around to glance at Muire. Her face was hard. Both of them looked at the Shou's untouched tankard. "Dead man's ale, Muire," Tycho said.

The tavern keeper took the tankard and dumped the ale inside into a slop bucket. Tycho nodded and turned back around. Throughout the Ease, conversation was muted as people dived deep into their ale. Tycho pulled his strilling back up to his shoulder and put bow to string. Music rippled out, bringing sound back into the tavern and pushing away memory of the Shou's brief, ill-fated visit.

CHAPTER 2

Going off with the man in the red tunic was a risk. Li clenched his teeth as the door of the stinking tavern slammed shut behind them. That had been his intent though, hadn't it? Find a dockside tavern and use one of the locals to locate Brin. The information he had obtained through haunting the wharves of Telflamm had been enough to suggest such a strategy would be the quickest and least obtrusive means of finding the hin-man. He could feel that he was close now—anticipation was a knife twisting in his gut. Maybe he should have waited for daybreak. Maybe he should have found a more reputable guide.

The short, hairy singer's pathetic look of warning had been an insult. Li didn't need to be warned. The man in the red tunic would most likely try to rob him. But to be so close to Brin... sometimes it was necessary to walk with the wolf when you were stalking the tiger.

Out in the yard, the corpse was still hanging from the tree. The man in the red tunic gave it a lingering gaze as they passed then glanced briefly at Li. The Shou pressed his lips together and said nothing. The man wouldn't let the silence rest. "I'm Lander," he said.

"Kuang Li Chien."

"So what's your business with Brin? Why are you looking for him?"

Li gave Lander a thin look. "It is a thing between Brin and me."

"Brin doesn't like being bothered. Just to warn you." "Thank you for the warning, but what Brin likes or does not like is of little concern to me," Li said bluntly. His guide shrugged.

They walked on. The falling snow was forming a thick blanket on the ground and made Lander's torch hiss threateningly. Apparently used to such miserable wet and cold weather, Lander tramped ahead, ignoring the layer of snow that built up on his head and shoulders. He began to talk, filling the snow-muffled silence with pointless prattle. Questions about Li's arrival in Spandeliyon. Comments on the quality of ale at the Wench's Ease. Biting remarks about the hairy singer, Tycho—it seemed the thug and the singer didn't get along. That was little surprise. Based on his own brief experience with Tycho, Li didn't much care, for him either. He only half-listened to what Lander was saying, though. The man had a gravelly, clipped voice that turned every word into a rough grunt, and following his babble closely would have taken most of his concentration. As it was, his concentration was already focused on peering through the thick curtain of snow and trying to keep track of their surroundings.

It wasn't easy and the glare of torchlight on the falling snow only made it worse. The street that they followed was narrow and twisting, clearly not the same route that he had taken to the tavern from the docks, though it had seemed when they left the Wench's Ease that they were headed back in that direction. Still, they should surely have passed close to the water once more by now. If they were following a reasonably straight route. Li fixed his gaze on a particularly crooked doorway. "When I said I was looking for Brin," he said, choosing his words carefully, "the people in the tavern were afraid. Is Brin dangerous?"

An extended commentary on winter weather interrupted, Lander blinked. "Yes," he said after a moment.

That was no surprise, Li thought. By all accounts, the hin had been a scourge as a pirate. "Dangerous enough that even the mention of his name is frightening?"

Lander shrugged. Snow fell from his shoulders. "Brin controls this part of the docks. He's a bad man to cross. Someone goes looking for Brin, they're looking for trouble."

"And yet," commented Li, "you would anger him by robbing someone who is looking for him."

Lander's pace faltered, but not by much.

"We've come this way before," Li said.

"It's the snow," grunted his guide. "It's confusing if you're not used to it."

"I have walked in snow before." He paused then added, "The reward I mentioned is easier earned than taken." He gave his dao a meaningful rattle in its scabbard. Lander glanced down at it once and then looked away. He said nothing more. Neither did Li. The Shou allowed himself a slight smile of triumph. If things went so easily with Brin, he would be well pleased.

The first hint that his warning had perhaps not been as successful as he thought came in the form of a sudden sound in the darkness, the abrupt crunch of a foot on old snow. Quick as a thought, Lander was whirling on him

almost before Li had a chance to register the sound or the four figures that came rushing out of the shadows on three sides—the men Lander had been sitting with in the tavern. Li drew a sharp breath. Lander's silence hadn't been shock, he realized. He had been listening for his allies!

The men wasted no words on threats. Lander was closest and he swung his torch like a mace straight at Li, the flame of it guttering blue with the force of the blow. If he had been expecting Li, his blade not drawn, to jump back, however, he had guessed wrong.

Li stepped into the arc of the torch and swept up his sheathed dao to turn Lander's swing. His right hand jabbed forward underneath, stiff fingers hitting Lander just below his ribs. The thug choked, doubled over, and staggered away. In the wild light of the swinging torch, Li stepped back, let his pack fall to the ground, wrapped his hand around the grip of his dao, and drew the weapon in a swift, smooth motion.

Two of his attackers wavered, startled by this sudden whirlwind of action. Li slashed at a third in a threadbare coat, driving him back a step. "Damn it, Serg, hold your ground!" Lander croaked in warning. "Nico, watch the saber!"

The fourth attacker managed to get his own sword up. Blades clashed, the lighter western sword skittering under the wide, heavy dao, but still stopping it. Li lashed out with his empty scabbard, cracking the stiff wood into Nico's side. The blow would do no more than sting, but it was enough of a distraction to force the man's guard to slip; his stance wavered. Li surged forward and thrust him away into a snowdrift. The man in the threadbare coat—Serg—was advancing again. With a snap of his wrist, Li flung his scabbard at him. Serg brushed it aside with his weapon, a stout club, but looked up to find Li whirling at him. He flinched and raised his club to meet the dao. Li just dropped and knocked his feet out from under him with a leg sweep.

"All at once!" cursed Lander. The thug was upright again. The torch had been planted in the snow and Lander had a sword out, a thin, fast blade. "Ovel, Bor—get in there!" He began to close in cautiously himself.

At least he wasn't a rearguard leader. The two attackers who had been hanging back glanced at each other and stepped forward as well. Nico was staggering out of the snowdrift. Serg was slowly climbing to his feet. They still had him very nearly surrounded. Li drew a deep breath and stepped into the clear space between them, dao at the ready. "I think Brin will be angry if you stop me," he said. "I have come a long way to meet him."

Lander smiled like a wolf. "Now, here's the thing. If Brin really wanted to meet you, you'd know where to find him. You wouldn't need to be asking for directions in places like the Wench's Ease. I don't think he's going to be angry if he never sees you."

"You presume to know what Brin wants?"

"As it happens," said Lander, "I work for Brin. I do know what he wants. And he doesn't want to see every blood-mad lunatic who comes looking for revenge." Li's breath hissed and Lander's smile grew wider. "If you're smart, you'll give us everything you've got, get out of Spandeliyon, and forget Brin. What did he do to you? Kill someone?"

"Brin?" Li replied. "No."

This was no time to fight. He spun sharply. The men who had stayed back were Lander's weakest. Li threw himself at them with a vicious scream, dao slicing through the falling snow. Sure enough, the men's nerve broke and they scrambled aside. Li hurtled between them to freedom—

—and a snowdrift. Suddenly snow that had been barely above his ankles reached almost to his knees as his weight broke through the icy crust that fresh snow had hidden. Legs trapped, body still moving, Li fell flat. Ice crystals scraped against his face. Snow packed into his mouth and nose. Before he could do more than haul himself half-upright, a

heavy mass slammed into him, forcing him back down into the snow. A club cracked against his right forearm and again, numbing it so that someone could seize his hand and wrench away his dao. Other hands slapped off his cap; the club came down across the back of his head in an explosion of pain. More pain came after. The weight—someone's body—rolled off his back and blows began to rain down on him, knocking him out of the snowdrift and tumbling him across the ground. Lander and his men were laughing and spitting insults at him. Li tried to shield himself, to roll back to his feet, but all that earned him were more blows. The end of a club jammed hard into his ribs. A fist slammed across his face. The snow that clung to him dulled some of the pain, but Li could taste blood on his lips.

"Hey!" Suddenly there was a cry out of the snow and a new figure moved into the circle of torchlight. Through eyes already swelling shut, Li caught a brief glimpse of a tough-looking woman in some kind of uniform, an emblem or crest bright on her coat. "What's this—oh." Lander spat something at her, but Li caught only "... Brin's business." He flicked her a coin. The woman nodded and faded back into the shadows.

"No ... help... " Li reached out for her. A foot came down hard on his hand. He looked up into Lander's face just as the thug's other foot swung forward and kicked him in the head. Darkness fell on him. He was dimly aware of a tugging sensation and the cold touch of snow on his limbs. He was being stripped, just like the corpse hanging outside the Wench's Ease. He struggled again. Or at least he thought he did. Nothing seemed to happen. Comments reached him from a distance. "This was his reward?" He heard the clinking of coins. "That's it?"

A curse. "Check his pack." More cursing. "Never mind, his things will fetch some more coin." A kick rolled Li over. The press of cold snow against his bare belly forced a moan out of him and made him curl up. One of Lander's men must

have thought it was a sign of recovery. Li received another kick.

"Dump him in the alley. They'll find him in spring. This has been a good night's work." Lander laughed, his voice, punctuated by the hiss and click of a sword being returned to its scabbard. A sword—or his dao. Li's mouth worked in protest, but nothing came out. Hands grabbed him. His legs brushed through snow as he was dragged across the ground and thrown down. His head hit a wall, lighting the darkness with pain.

That light faded fast. No, he thought, not now. Not after so long, not when I'm so close... Lander's laughter faded.

Hot anger stirred. Li forced himself up and began to crawl after the sound. Or at least he thought he did. In the alley, snow settled on his body.

"Olore," called Tycho as he stepped out through the door of the Wench's Ease. "On the morrow!" Muire didn't even look up, just gave a vague grunt of farewell. Tycho didn't bother trying to coax anything more out of her. The night had been a failure. In spite of his best efforts, the crowd had never really recovered after the Shou's visit. Customers had finished their drinks and quickly left, their spirits done in. Only a couple of hours after the Shou's departure, the crowd had thinned down to those few patrons who had no need of music to encourage their drinking. Tycho had called himself finished and Muire had handed over his night's pay with a pained expression on her face. Two silver Sembian ravens and eight pennies.

Tycho looked up at the night sky. Snow was still falling, oblivious to the evening's events. In fact, enough had fallen to lay a good handspan on the ground. The churned ground of the yard was almost perfectly smooth now. Ardo's body was gone, he hoped taken by someone who would see it properly laid to rest. He hoped. There were some very desperate people on the dockside of Spandeliyon and there

were rumors of necromancers and evil priests who would pay good coin for an unblessed body.

On another night, he might have walked in the dark. Rumored necromancers aside, the dockside streets held no fear for him. He knew them well. Tonight, though, the fresh snow would make footing treacherous. He checked the flap of leather that protected his strilling and reached

into a pouch to extract a coin. He snorted when his fingers pulled up one of the silver ravens. Maybe it was a good sign. Focusing his concentration, he sang a few rippling words.

The coin shimmered and began to glow with the cool, unwavering light of magic. Tugging on his mitten and holding the shining coin carefully, Tycho began to make his way home.

When he had first left Spandeliyon, he had never thought he would be coming back. Had never thought that he'd have to suffer through another winter of snow and sea storms. He had pictured himself traveling with the seasons, spending the winter months in Amn or Tethyr or maybe even Calimshan then moving back north to pass summers in great northern cities such as glittering Waterdeep. Of course even through seven years of travel, he had never made it farther south than the Vilhon Reach or farther west than Cormyr. He had never visited Water-deep either, but he had seen cities enough to appreciate that each glittered in its own way. Except possibly for Spandeliyon.

He had, at least, spent winters in far more comfortable locations, singing songs and spinning tales in taverns much grander than the Wench's Ease. And most of the time he had walked out of them at the end of the night with more than two silver coins and a scant handful of pennies.

Seven years away and two years back. He was lucky he hadn't angered too many people when he left. Tycho turned off the street and cut down a narrow shortcut between two buildings. Too bad he hadn't kept more of the coin he had made then. Unfortunately, the life of a wandering bard

wasn't one that tended to encourage saving coin. He'd found that out the hard way. He and his mentor both—

He was just stepping out into the next street when his foot went down into a snowdrift and hit something underneath. Something soft. Something that let out a quiet moan.

Tycho jumped back so fast that he landed on his backside in the snow, strilling jangling at the impact. His enchanted coin went flying from his grasp and up into the air. For a moment, light splashed around the alley, and then the coin plunged into the snow as well, choking off all but a dim glow. In that faint half-light, Tycho stared at the snowdrift. No, not a snow drift, he realized. A person buried by the falling snow. And if he had been lying there long enough to have snow piled that deep on top of him... Tycho scrambled across the alley to the glow that marked his coin and pulled it free. Clamping the cold metal between his teeth, he began shoveling with his hands at the snow-covered figure.

He found an arm and a hand—a man's hand—first, the naked flesh pale with cold. Almost miraculously, the fingers clenched as he touched them. They hadn't frozen and there was no sign of frostbite. "That's good," he mumbled past the coin in his mouth. "Hold on, friend, I'll have you out in a minute." He moved up the arm to the shoulder and head, scooping away snow.

The face that emerged was Shou. Tycho's hands stopped and he sat back. Kuang Li Chien—not that there were any other Shou in Spandeliyon. He'd taken a beating. Snow and blood clung to his face in icy clumps. It looked like Tycho's suspicions of Lander and his men had been correct.

Except that Li Chien was still alive. Tycho couldn't have said how. Some kind of magic, maybe. Sheer luck more likely. Lander must have left him here in the alley, expecting him to die. Tycho blew out his breath slowly. He was almost tempted to leave the Shou as well. His behavior at the Wench's Ease had been more than insulting. He hadn't just

declined Tycho's attempts to warn him first about Brin then about Lander—he had all but thrown them back in his face. Li Chien had brought this on himself, Tycho thought. Why should I give him any help now? I should get up, walk away... "Ah, bind me," the bard muttered. Lander left people in alleys. He wasn't Lander. He leaned forward again and began digging into the snow once more.

As more of the Shou's body came into view, Tycho clenched his jaw. Li Chien was in worse shape than he had thought. He had been stripped of everything but his smallclothes—unless there was some magic talisman hidden down there, it was pure luck that had kept him alive. Most of his torso was covered with the faint beginnings of some very large bruises. Two fingers on one hand were bent and probably broken. The snow was most likely the only thing keeping them from swelling. Lander and his men had beaten him badly. "Bitch Queen's mercy, what did you do to get them that angry?" Tycho wondered aloud. He hauled Li Chien into something of a sitting position and managed to flop him over his shoulder, wincing as the Shou's arms hit the strilling slung on his back. Another moan escaped Li Chien's cold lips. Tycho snorted.

"You say you want a song now? Great time to change your mind. It's going to have to wait." Tycho got his feet under himself and, with a tremendous groan, stood up. Li Chien was a dead weight balanced precariously on his shoulder. Every step was a challenge, the Shou's weight and the deep snow combining to keep him off balance and staggering. In spite of the cold, Tycho was soon dripping with sweat. His legs and back were burning. More than once, he almost swallowed the glowing coin as he fought to keep it from falling out of his teeth; eventually, he simply spat it out and held it clenched in one mittened fist, lighting his way with a thin sliver of light cast between thumb and fingers.

Home was in a building on Bakers Way. It was only one street over, but it seemed like the farthest distance Tycho had ever

walked. By the time he kicked open the outer door of the building, he was shaking with exhaustion. The narrow stairs that led up to the second floor and his rooms were almost a blessing; he was able to brace himself against the outer wall as he lifted one foot then the other, forcing himself up the stairs. "Veseene!" he croaked. "Veseene! Help! Open the door!"

He was almost at the top of the stairs before he heard the squeal of a bolt being drawn back. In the little hallway above, a door opened—just a crack at first then wide. A frail old woman stood in the doorway, faded blue eyes as wide as the door itself, a night robe wrapped around her thin body. She stretched out trembling arms as Tycho stumbled up the last few steps. He shook his head at the offer. "Get blankets," he gasped, "and stir the fire up!"

Veseene nodded and stood aside as he weaved through the door and quickly shut it behind him. "What happened? Who is this?" Her voice was a thin, wet rasp, like bubbles of air rising out of mud. Or through the wet phlegm that choked her throat. She bent—awkwardly—and looked at LiChien's face. "A Shou!"

"He came into the Wench's Ease looking for Brin,"

Tycho told her. "And left with Lander." He groaned as he sank down to his knees before the little fireplace that heated their rooms. Veseene didn't ask for any further explanation. Time might have taken its toll on her body, but her mind was still quick. She stepped over to the low couch that was her bed and stripped off the blankets, spreading them out on the ground between Tycho and the fireplace.

Even that simple action was almost beyond her. Tycho watched her shaking hands twist and pull at the blankets, clenched fingers betraying her. He said nothing. When the blankets were spread enough to cradle the Shou's body, he laid Li Chien out with a grateful grunt of relief. Veseene was already on her feet and trying to wrestle a stout chunk of oak onto the carefully banked embers of the fireplace. Tycho

jumped up. "Let me do that," he said, taking the wood from her. She gave it up almost gratefully. In return, Tycho passed her the glowing coin. "The spell should last a few minutes more. Can you look at him? I think he's hurt bad."

As Veseene lowered herself to kneel beside the unconscious Shou, Tycho shook off his mittens and set to work on the banked fire with a rusty poker and more chunks of wood until flames were leaping. Behind him, Veseene ran fingers over Li Chien, occasionally hissing and cursing under her breath. "It's a miracle he isn't frozen solid!" she said in wonder.

"I know. He was buried when I found him." Tycho turned around and stripped off his coat and striding before stepping over Li Chien's body and kneeling across from Veseene. "How is he?"

"Very bad. Broken fingers." Veseene pressed against the unconscious man's chest. His flesh sank in with a distinct crunch. "And ribs." Her other hand moved down to his abdomen and tapped. The sound it made was hard and hollow; here the flesh didn't give at all. Veseene shook her head. "Bleeding inside. Touch his neck. Feel for the beat of his heart."

There was no question of Veseene doing that herself. Her hands shook too badly. Tycho flexed his own fingers and pressed the tips against the man's neck just under his jaw. The Shou's skin seemed even colder now. He frowned and shifted his fingers. Nothing. There was no pulse. He bit his lip and bent down and put his ear against Li Chien's naked chest, trying to focus past the snap and pop of the fire. There ... the sound of it might be faint and slow, but Li Chien's heart was still beating. Barely. He glanced up at Veseene. She nodded. Tycho swallowed and sat back then held out his hands, palms down. Drawing a deep breath, he reached deep into himself and pulled up magic.

The spell that lent light to the coin had been a simple one. The spell he sang now was more complex and entirely

different, soft and almost wordless. Anyone who had heard his raucous songs at the Ease tonight probably > wouldn't have even recognized him as the same singer. Light was a simple thing to invoke. Healing was much harder. As the magic took shape, Tycho bent it to his will, visualizing it as a warmth pouring out of his hands and into Li Chien's battered body. He spread his fingers out and in his imagination the healing power wove itself around the worst of the Shou's injuries. The bleeding in his abdomen stopped. The cracked ends in his ribs realigned and knit themselves back together. His broken fingers straightened. Some little magic trickled into the bruises that covered him, but more settled into his very

blood, tracing a path of gentle heat back to his slow, cold heart and prodding it back to—

Li Chien's eyes snapped open. His body bucked, and he sucked in air with such a violent gasp that Tycho yelped and jumped away. Song and magic vanished. "Bind and tar me!" he cursed. Li Chien was thrashing around in a delirium. Now that he had air in his lungs, he was screaming, too, a babble of Shou too fast and slurred for Tycho to follow—except for two words repeated in the shrieks.

"Yu maol Yu maol" , Hands and feet lashed out in unconscious rage. Veseene scrambled back as well. The sudden movement set her off on a fit of choking and coughing. Heedless of the man's recently healed injuries, Tycho threw himself across him. The Shou was substantially taller than he and stronger, too, but Tycho managed to straddle him and pin his arms. "Easy!" he shouted. "Easy, you're with friends." Li Chien just kept raving and struggling. Tycho gritted his teeth and repeated himself in Shou. That seemed to have more effect and Li Chien slowly calmed down and relaxed—though not before there was a pounding on the floor from the rooms beneath them. Tycho kicked his snow-soggy boot against the floor in ill-tempered response. "Oh, quiet down yourselves!" He rolled off Li Chien

and wiped his face. "Aye-ya. What was that about? Are you all right, Veseene?"

Veseene had crept back to Li Chien's side and was checking him over. She nodded. "I'm fine. He was just delirious. Don't worry." She poked at his abdomen and ribs again. There was no crunching sound when she pressed on his chest and his abdomen was relaxed and soft. Still, Li Chien's body was blotched with big bruises. Many even looked worse than they had before. Tycho grimaced.

"The healing wasn't enough."

"No," Veseene corrected him. "It was just enough." She ran her trembling hands over Li Chien's legs and arms. "You healed the worst. His bruises are fading. He'll be sore in the morning, but he'll be alive." She reached out with one hand and patted Tycho's arm. "You were never much good at healing. Don't worry." Veseene turned back to Li Chien. She pointed a thin finger at an old rag bound high around the Shou's left arm. "A bandage? An old wound?"

Tycho shook his head and shrugged. "I don't know. I was looking at other things before." The rag, still wet with melted snow, was so dirty and worn that it almost blended in with his skin. If it was covering an old wound, whatever was underneath it might have been in bad condition before his healing, maybe even infected. The magic might have taken care of it—or perhaps not. He reached for the rag.

His fingers had barely brushed it before Li Chien gasped and stirred again, snapping his elbow up. Tycho swayed back, but the elbow caught him in the gut anyway. If Li Chien had been more aware, the blow might have really hurt. As it was, it was more of an unexpected shock. Tycho grunted then caught Li Chien's arm. "All right, calm down," he said in Shou. "I won't touch it." Whether the assurance did any good was hard to tell. Li Chien was already sagging back into unconsciousness. Tycho glanced up at Veseene. "What now?"

She pulled up an edge of the blanket and wrapped it over Li

Chien. "Let him sleep," she advised. "Magic can accomplish great things, but a body's natural reactions still need to be indulged. Wrap him up and let him sleep by the fire. He'll be warm. We'll see how he is when he wakes."

Tycho followed her example, tucking the blankets around Li Chien and wrapping him snugly. A folded shirt went under his head as a pillow. When they were finished, he went to the narrow cot where he slept and stripped off his own blankets. "You use these," he told Veseene.

"And what will you use?" the old woman asked stubbornly.

"I can sleep under my coat."

She snorted. "I could sleep under your coat just as well. I slept under coats and cloaks a thousand times while I was traveling!"

"You're not traveling anymore—and aren't blankets warmer than a coat?" Tycho steered Veseene over to her couch.

"Besides, I need to stay awake for at least a while to tend the fire. I'll be fine."

Veseene grumbled, but finally gave up her protests. She settled down onto the couch and drew the blankets over herself. Tycho gave the fire a careful stir, heaping the coals up around the oak log, then he pulled his cot over closer to it and picked up his coat. The garment was still wet from his walk home. He grimaced and wrapped it around himself anyway before stretching out on the cot.

In the shadows, Veseene sighed. "Don't think about it, Veseene," Tycho said.

"I wish I could have done more. Once—"

"Once you could have healed him and sent him out dancing afterward." He turned his head and glanced at her. His mentor's eyes reflected the firelight. Her jaw was set and firm, but he knew that under the blankets her hands would be clasped tight, one around the other, as if that could prevent their shaking.

There were some things—some very few things—that magic couldn't heal.

There was a time, Tycho thought, when the voice of Veseene the Lark was known from coast to coast around the Sea of Fallen Stars. A time when her magic—the subtle spells of a bard rather than the pure power of a wizard or holy prayers of a priest—had enthralled taverns and festhalls and brought comfort to the common folk of towns and cities. A time, even in the fading days of her glory, when she had seen promise in the squeaking of a Spandeliyon dock rat and taken him for her apprentice, to travel with her and learn her songs and stories.

But no one, it turned out, had much use for a lark that could no longer fly.

Veseene closed her eyes and Tycho looked back to the fire. And Li Chien. The Shou's chest was rising and falling with the regular rhythm of sleep. Tycho drew a slow breath and let it out quietly. Gods bless us, I hope you appreciate my help this time, he thought, because Lander isn't going to. And if you're lucky, Brin will never even know you came looking for him.

"... fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty." Silver flashed in the candlelight as Giras counted. He looked up and blinked eyes still rheumy from having been woken in the middle of the night. "You're sure you don't want to part with that saber? I know someone who would pay very well for it."

"I'm keeping it." Lander swept a healthy pile of coins off Giras's counter and into his pouch. He picked up the Shou curved saber—back inside its sheath once more—and saluted the fence with it. "I've taken a fancy to it."

Giras shrugged. "Suit yourself. If you change your mind, though, bring it back. Just not so late next time."

"You sleep like you were an honest man, Giras."

Lander left the shop. The snow had stopped and the moon was peeking through the clouds, its light turning the fresh snow bright. Nico, Ovel, Bor, and Serg were waiting for him. They clustered around as soon as he appeared. "How much

did you get?" Bor demanded.

"Fifty," lied Lander.

"Fifty?" Bor made a face. "That's only... " Lander saw his fingers move as he counted. "Ten each."

"Eight," Lander said. "Two of every ten to Brin." There were grumbles all around. Lander swept his men with 'a hard glare. "You'd rather get nothing? Or maybe you want to hold back on Brin and count your fingers when he's done with you?" He pulled coins out of his pouch and began distributing them.

"Hey!" complained Serg. "You kept the sword!"

"Is there a problem with that?"

Serg's anger faltered. "I could have used the coat," he whined.

"You can come back in the morning and buy it from Giras. I'm sure he'll give you a good price." Lander dropped the remaining coins back in his pouch and watched his men suspiciously count out their shares. "All there? Good. Go home. I'm going to see Brin. Anyone want to come with me?" His men said their good-byes with unseemly haste and vanished into the night. Lander smiled grimly to himself and set off back down to dockside. Giras's shop was situated on the very edge of Spandeliyon's middle town. Not the quickest walk up from the dives of the dockside, but worth it whenever anything of value found its way into his hands. With access to a better class of customer, Giras was willing to pay a little more. Sometimes a lot more.

Lander considered the Shou's saber as he walked. Maybe he should have sold it. The hilt was nicely put together, with a fine grip of some coarse-grained leather he didn't recognize and bronze fittings carved with Shou characters. The scabbard matched it, fashioned from wood, brass, and the same coarse leather dyed red. The only problem was that it wasn't meant to be worn like a normal sword. He figured out how to clip it to his belt, but to draw it properly, he would have to carry it as the Shou had. He could figure out a way

to fix that though. He buffed the hilt and nodded to himself. It was a nasty, heavy weapon. No, he'd keep it. For now, anyway.

Lander turned a corner onto a street very close to the waterfront and walked up to a long, low building. Painted along the wall and across the door was the sinuous body of an enormous eel. He went inside. In spite of the hour, there were still people around, though most of them were deep in drunken sleep. Those few who were awake glanced at Lander and then quickly turned back to their beer and whatever whispered conversations they were holding. Lander caught the eye of the bartender, a massive man who was as hairless as an egg, and raised his eyebrow. The bartender tilted his head ever so slightly toward the back of the festhall. Lander went that way. Off to one side, a room of gambling tables lay quiet for the night. Off to the other, a heavy curtain hid the way to a series of small rooms where more intimate pleasures could be had. Lander steered his way between the two, pushing aside another curtain to enter a narrow, dark passage.

The sound reached him first as he groped his way through the darkness. Someone was weeping in agony. Smell followed and Lander wrinkled his nose

at the pungent barnyard stench. No matter how often that stink assaulted him, he could never get used to it. He gulped air, though, and forced the grimace from his face as his fingers touched rough wood. He stepped through a door to the wide alley behind the Eel and the pigsty Brin kept there. Bitch Queen's mercy, most of the pigs were asleep. They made a great mass of quivering, snorting flesh in among the straw under the covered portion of the sty. The heat of their bodies kept the shelter comfortable even in the coldest weather; the snow on the roof was already melting in big, fat drops. The pigs hadn't had a chance yet to churn up what snow had fallen on the ground and the sty looked almost pretty. Lander knew better. He picked his way carefully,

trying not to disturb the filth underneath.

To one side of the sty, there was a table with a lantern and a bench. Sitting astride the bench, his ankles bound together underneath it, was a man named Kiril. Lander knew him. He collected extortion coin for Brin from several shops on the east of dockside.

His right hand was tied around behind his back. His left was caught in a screw press. He was the one doing the weeping. Judging from the wet state of his hair and shoulders, he had been outside for some time.

Sitting cross-legged on the table beside the press was Brin. Barely three feet tall, the halfling might have been mistaken for a very slight child except for the pinched cruelty of his face. His mouth was narrow and harsh, and a patch covered his left eye socket. There were various tales of how Brin had lost that eye. Some said he put it out himself. Lander didn't believe that. He did, however, believe that Brin was fully capable of such a thing. "Brin," he said in greeting.

"Lander!" Brin's voice, rich and expressive, was a strange contrast to his face. No matter what was going on, he always seemed to be enjoying himself. Maybe that wasn't such a contrast after all. "Kiril, say hello to Lander." The man on the bench didn't respond. "I said, say hello!" Brin's tiny hand lashed out, swiping a pig switch across his prisoner's face. Kiril's head jerked around. For the first time, Lander caught a glimpse of his face in the lantern light. Both cheeks were streaked with fine, bloody cuts from the switch.

"Lander," he said in a quavering voice.

"Kiril." Lander took a step forward.

In the shadows beside the table, something stirred and snuffled. Lander froze as an enormous boar with wiry black hair and malignant yellow eyes turned around to face him. It looked at him with all the warmth of a feral cat, as if deciding whether to tolerate his presence or tear him up on the spot; great knife-sharp tusks curved up on either side of the boar's jaw. "Black Scratch," Lander said, barely able to

keep distaste from his voice.

"Easy, Scratch." Brin's switch dipped down to tickle one of the boar's ragged ears. "Now, Kiril, I think you could learn from Lander. I ask him to do something for me and he does it. To the letter." Brin looked up at Lander. "I heard about the lynching. Good work."

Lander nodded. "I've got something else for you. Ran into someone tonight and took care of him for you." He walked up to the table and set down twelve silver coins. Brin's eye glanced over them.

"You had sixty off him or his goods. You probably told your men—what? Fifty?" Lander nodded again. Brin nudged the screw press, drawing another whimper from Kiril. "Did you catch that, Kiril? Lander might cheat his men, but he knows better than to cheat me. I get what's mine. Is that so hard to understand?" "N-no, Brin," Kiril gulped.

"Are you going to try skimming from me again?" asked Brin. Kiril shook his head emphatically. "Good. I think that finishes our talk tonight." Brin stood up and heaved against the handle of the screw. Kiril let out a horrible scream that brought Black Scratch's ears pricking up and a flurry of alarm from the sleeping pigs in their shelter. "Sorry," apologized Brin, "I guess that was the wrong way."

He slapped the handle and sent the screw spinning up. As Kiril whimpered and held up a hand that was alternately red from the press and white from the night's cold, Brin hopped down and drew a sharp little knife, reaching under the bench to slash the cord that bound the man's feet. "Now get out of my sight," he spat. He drew back the pig switch.

Kiril didn't let it touch him. He was moving before the switch fell, leaping to his feet and stumbling away into the darkness, the back way out of the alley. Lander looked after him briefly. "What did he do?"

"Told a tailor and a cobbler that I wanted more coin and kept the extra for himself." Brin scooped clean snow off the bench

and scrubbed his hands with it. The snow, Lander saw, came away flecked with red from dried blood. Black Scratch came out into the light and Brin finished wiping his hands on the boar's bristly coat. The huge pig acted as if it was nothing and began snuffling around. "Everything went well at the Wench's Ease?"

"I'll talk to Ardo's brother tomorrow. Boat or cash, Ton's debts will be covered, I think."

"And nobody caught on?"

Lander shrugged, trying to ignore Black Scratch. "Tycho figured it out. He didn't say anything to anyone, though."

"If he's smart, he won't. Sharp tack but sometimes too clever for himself." He climbed up onto the bench and reached for the coins on the tabletop. "Sixty silver. Pretty good. Who was he?"

"Just someone else looking for revenge. He couldn't have been in Spandeliyon too long—he just walked into the Wench's Ease and announced that he was looking for a former pirate." Brin's eyebrows shot up. Lander gave him a smile. "Then he named you. You could have driven your pigs through the Ease and no one would have noticed."

"You're kidding." Brin sat down on the bench, legs dangling over the edge. "Nobody is that—"

Black Scratch interrupted him by giving a loud grunt and butting hard against Lander's leg. The boar's weight sent him staggering. Lander gave the beast a hard glare, but when he looked up, it was to find Brin staring at him.

"Lander," asked the halfling, "what's that?" He pointed. Lander reached down. His hand encountered the Shou curved saber.

For a moment, his heart jumped. "It belonged to the man who came looking for you," he said cautiously. "You told me I could keep weapons that caught my eye."

"I remember. Let me see it!"

Lander struggled with the saber for a heartbeat before he got it undipped from his belt. He handed it to Brin, Black

Scratch following his every move like a trained guard dog. Brin examined the weapon and its scabbard closely. "The man who was looking for me was a Shou?"

"Yeah."

"Did he give his name?" His voice was sharp as a knife edge. Lander's heart jumped again. "Kang—no, Kuang. Kuang Li Chien." The man's words came back to him. And yet you would anger Brin by robbing someone who is looking for him. He swallowed hard. "Brin, you said you wanted me to take care of anyone who came looking for you without an invitation!"

"I know what I said," Brin snapped. "What happened to the Shou?"

"I... my men and I took him for a walk. He put up a fight. We left him in an alley by Gold Lane."

"Go and get him. Bring him here." Brin rubbed his face with his free hand.

"Brin... " Lander hesitated then said, "he's probably dead by now."

Brin glanced up. There was anger in his eye. "Then bring me his body! I want to see him!" He thrust the saber back at him.

Lander snatched it and ran, following in Kiril's tracks. Filth from Brin's pigs splattered up around his boots. He ignored it. Out of the sty, out of the alley, twisting through the narrow gap that led back onto the street. Images of Kiril's mangled hand—of much worse things that he had seen Brin do to people who displeased him—kept popping into his mind. Lander tried to shove them away, concentrating instead on taking the shortest possible route back to Gold Lane. The snow dragged at his legs, making running hard. He didn't slow down.

At least Brin didn't need the Shou alive!

His legs were like lead and his throat and lungs raw from gulping cold air by the time he reached Gold Lane and slid to a stop at the mouth of the alley. There was a

clear mound of snow in the shadows. Lander dropped the saber and plunged his arms into the snow, digging frantically for the Shou's frozen body. It only took a moment before he rocked back on his heels in dismay.

There was no body under the snow. He swung around and scanned the moonlit street. Whether Kuang Li Chien had managed to crawl away from his doom or some bodysnatcher had staggered off with his corpse, there was no sign of it now. His own footsteps were the only things marring the smooth surface of the snow.

Lander drew a shuddering breath and wondered how long he could stay out before he had to go back and face Brin.

CHAPTER 3

Li woke with a start to unfamiliar sensations. The smell of cold ashes in his nose and mouth. The feel of rough wool against his naked flesh. An aching stiffness through his entire body. A horrible grating, rumbling sound in his ears. His eyes snapped open.

Narrow beams of cold dawn light pierced between shutters, casting pale illumination on a cramped room. The whole place was little bigger than the cabin he had taken on the ship from Telflamm. A clutter of junk, indistinct in the dim light, made it seem even smaller. On a worn couch slept an old woman with a bird's nest of fine gray hair. Li himself lay on the floor before a small fireplace that put out only the vaguest whisper of

warmth. The grating, snorting sound... Li raised his head just slightly and peered down the length of his body.

Sprawled on a cot at his feet, the singer from the Wench's Ease snored like a demon.

Li lowered his head and stared up at a ceiling of water-stained boards. What had happened? He remembered last night—remembered Lander's attack and being left by the thug to die in an alley. What then? Cold—then a wonderful warmth. And after that... Movement. Renewed flashes of pain

in the darkness. And a sharp light that brought awareness flooding back to him. Magic. Li had felt the distinctive touch of magical healing before. He shifted his body cautiously. He still hurt, but surely less than he should have after such a vicious beating as Lander's men had given him.

There had been something else about the healing magic, though, something that nagged at his mind. More than light and warmth, there had been ... song. His head came up again and he glanced sharply at the snoring singer. Was there more to Tychoben Arisaenn than a foolish tavern-singer? He had heard that sometimes the musicians and storytellers of the west had some talent with magic—

Another memory of Tycho surfaced abruptly, though. Fingers tugging on his arm and the cloth knotted around it. Li gasped softly and reached across his body, feeling for the cloth himself. It was still there, undisturbed. Li let out a sigh of relief, and then grimaced in frustration.

Alone in this foul little city, robbed of nearly everything, dependent on the mercy of strangers—on the mercy of a singer of all people, no matter what arcane skill he might possess! Could the long journey from Shou Lung have come to this? And if Lander did indeed work for Brin as he had claimed, then the hin knew that Li had come looking for him. He would be ready for him.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps Lander's attack had been a blessing. If Lander had told Brin about the attack, then Brin must surely think him dead. Li's eyes narrowed. That couldn't last long. He looked to the cold light that cut through the shutters. Dawn was breaking. The day was already slipping away. The sooner he did what he had come here to do, the sooner he could be away from this vile place. He pulled back the blankets that wrapped him and rose quietly, hesitated, and reached back down to pick up one of the blankets. He wrapped it around himself, covering his near-nakedness. By all rights, he should be leaving something for Tycho, not taking from him, but his

smallclothes aldne wouldn't get him very far. It was, perhaps, fortunate that Tycho was smaller than he; there was no point in even contemplating taking any of his clothes. He would find some somewhere else. He would need them and not just because of the cold.

He had been too eager last night, too caught up in his quest. He shouldn't have tried to find—and confront—Brin on his own. Even a town like Spandeliyon would have a guard force or a town watch. He should have gone to them last night. The proper authorities would help him find Brin. At the very least, they should help him find Lander, and now Li had a personal score to settle with the thug. He clenched his fist slowly, making the knuckles pop.

There were two doors out of the squalid room, but only one of them showed traces of water and mud stains on the floorboards beneath. Stepping softly in time with Tycho's thunderous snores, Li crossed the room and eased it open. Outside was a dark hallway with a narrow stair. Li took one glance back at Tycho and the old woman, stepped out, closed the door behind himself, and hastened down the stairs. They creaked alarmingly under his weight, but at least the wood was worn smooth beneath his bare feet. Boots, he reminded himself with another grimace, he would need to find boots even before he found clothing.

Fortune smiled on him. He was almost at the bottom of the stairs when a door opened onto the morning and a tall man staggered in stinking of ale. Blinded by the transition from light to dark, he probably registered nothing more than a vague figure in the shadows. Li reared back, one hand braced on the wall and the other on the stairs' rickety railing, and caught him on the chest with a hard double kick that sent him sliding bonelessly back through the door. Li stuck his head out into the cold and glanced up and down the street. There was no one out. He grabbed the tall man's feet and swiftly dragged him back inside.

"Bind him!" ranted Tycho. "Bind him and tar him and set him

out for bait!" He stomped—yet again—on the patch of floor where Li Chien had lain. There was yet another round of hammering from the room below, which Tycho responded to with even more stomping. ,

"Tycho, calm down!" ordered Veseene. She looked at him irritably and went back to fanning reluctant flames under a kettle in the fireplace. "Did you expect him to give you a reward?"

Tycho flung himself down on his cot. "He could have at least said 'thank you.' He was like this last night, too— curt and tighter with words than a Daleman with coin, so full of himself that he doesn't have time for anyone else." Veseene sighed and turned all the way around.

"Did you consider that maybe he isn't comfortable with our language?"

"He knows I speak Shou," grumbled Tycho. "He even insulted me over it."

"Then maybe he has something important on his mind."

Tycho dismissed the idea with a snort and stared into the fire. He didn't have to look at Veseene to know that she was rolling her eyes, but he heard her grunt as she climbed awkwardly to her feet and hobbled over to a cupboard.

"Fine," she said. "Sulk. You did a good thing and got no thanks for it. I once spent two months as a dog because I tried to throw a surprise party for a wizard friend."

He tried to hold back a smile, but failed. "It's impossible to sulk around you," he complained.

"I try my best." Veseene looked at him over her shoulder.

"Try to remember what I told you when I took you on, Tycho. A bard remembers everything, laughs, laments, mourns, and celebrates—"

"—and regrets nothing." Tycho sighed. "I know." He pushed himself up off the cot. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Here. Catch." Veseene opened the cupboard and tossed a big chunk of bread at him, followed in rapid succession by two mugs, a plate, and a piece of hard

cheese. Her aim was more than a little off, spoiled by the shaking of her hands, but Tycho darted forward and caught each item, juggling them easily in the air. His feet found the toasting iron. He flicked it upright with one foot, held it there with the toes of the other, and impaled first the cheese then the bread on it. The mugs and plate went down on top of a small table. Tycho kicked the iron up, spun around once, caught it, and had the bread held above the fire before Veseene could even close the cupboard. "Show off," she told him.

"If I can figure out a way to do that at the Ease, I could make an extra fifteen pennies off the crowd."

"Maybe Muire wants to hire a cook." Veseene set two small, plain boxes down beside the mugs. She opened one and the fragrant smell of mint filled the room. A spoonful of dried leaves went into one mug and she pushed it toward Tycho. When she opened the other box, however, the odor that emerged was very different, dusty and acrid. Veseene tilted the box and tapped it against the tabletop. She didn't bother with a spoon, but just tipped the contents of the box into the second mug—a small amount of crumbled, multicolored material came sifting out. "I'll need to go to Sephera today," she said.

"There's coin in the cupboard," Tycho told her. "Unless Li Chien took that as well your blanket." He turned and slid the toasted bread and cheese onto the plate then went back and lifted the kettle off the fire, filling their mugs with boiling water. He averted his face as he filled Veseene's. Her red-tinted tea smelled terrible when water was first added to the dry concoction. He wasn't sure how she managed to drink it, though he was glad she did. The tea was the only thing that staved off the worst effects of her palsy.

While his own tea steeped, Tycho poured the rest of the boiling water into a large basin to cool and laid out his razor and a cake of soap. Veseene's eyebrows rose gently. "What's the occasion?"

"It's an alternate fifth-day," Tycho told her. He opened the door of the second room of their little home. During the warm seasons, it was his bedroom, but in the winter, they closed it off to keep the main room warmer. Just inside the door was a chest; he opened it and took out a clean shirt, doublet, and breeches, snapping out the wrinkles with a flourish. "Laera Dantakain takes her lessons this morning and I'll be bait myself before I let an ill-mannered Shou put me off that!"

Veseene gave him a look of caution. "Tycho... "

He smiled at her. "Don't worry, Veseene. Everything is perfectly proper." Her eyebrows managed to rise even higher. "Really," Tycho assured her. "They're only music lessons."

"< "That's very good, but you're still holding it wrong." Tycho slid in behind Laera, correcting her posture with his own body. He stretched his arms around hers, moved her elbows, and reached forward to loosen stiff fingers. "And be gentle with the strings. Caress them when you pluck." His breath whispered across the side of her neck. "This is a harp, not a bow. You can pull the strings—" Tycho drew one back sharply and the muscles of his arm pressed against Laera's. "—but if you do, they'll break." He eased the string back into place. Laera gave a tiny sigh.

Out of her eyesight, Tycho allowed himself a grin. "That's good," he said, untwining himself from her. "Now play for me."

Laera tossed back long, glossy brown hair, narrowed her eyes in concentration, and began to play—quite prettily—The King of Pirates.

Tycho's grin turned into a choke. All they needed was the crowd from the Ease there to sing along! He was lucky that Laera's lessons took place in the library of the Dantakain home, where book-lined walls and thick doors muffled all sound. Back in dockside, the music would have carried

through an entire flimsy building! He put a hand

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hastily over the strings of the harp, stilling them. Laera blinked and stopped. "Ah, Laera," Tycho said, "I know your father is a stern man—"

"Tycho, you have no idea. He's been trying for eighteen years to keep me from growing up!" Laera pouted up at him with pretty brown eyes. "I swear he still thinks of me as a little girl."

It was hard to see how anyone could think of Laera Dantakain as a little girl. "I was going to say that surely he must make you practice your lessons." Tycho brushed Laera's hands away from the strings. "That isn't one of the songs I told you to practice."

"I heard some of the city guard singing it. Isn't it romantic? A pure-hearted maid swept away by the king of pirates to be his outlaw queen... "

Her fingers tangled for a moment with his. Tycho gave her a soft smile. "That's not... exactly what it's about, Laera. You probably shouldn't play it anymore. It's a very low-class song and not appropriate for a fine lady." Laera made a distinctly unladylike noise. "Your father wouldn't approve," Tycho added.

Laera's face screwed up. "My father is completely tone-deaf. He's the Captain of the Guard. The only tunes he can recognize are trumpet commands in battle. You know he couldn't give fish-guts about—" Tycho cleared his throat. Laera glowered and corrected herself archly. "You know he has no particular interest in whether I learn the skills of a lady."

"I'm sure he wants you to be attractive to any potential suitors."

"In Spandeliyon? In Altumbel? There aren't any." "Aglarond?"

Laera made a noise again. "Live with the elves? I don't think so." She swung the harp aside roughly—Tycho winced

as the strings jangled—and bounced to her feet. "I don't see why I need to learn the harp either. I like your strilling better." She went over to where the instrument lay on a table. Tycho moved to intercept her before she could give it the same rough treatment as her harp, but she just put the tip of a finger on the chunky sound box and ran it along the curved body. "That was all you needed to charm your way around the Sea of Fallen Stars, wasn't it? " She picked up the strilling and gave him a lingering look before turning her back to him. "Can you show me the proper way to hold it?" she asked over her shoulder.

Tycho's smile grew a little wider and he stepped up behind her. Before he could put his arms around her, though, the library doors opened and a lean man with carefully dressed hair walked in. Tycho hastily turned right around Laera and began correcting the position of the strilling briskly. "... and, of course, the strilling is the traditional instrument of Altumbel. You won't find it played anywhere else." He blinked and looked up at the lean man with an innocent gaze. "Olore, Jacerryl. Come for a recitation?"

"Tycho was just telling me about his strilling, uncle," added Laera.

Jacerryl Dantakain raised an eyebrow in polite disbelief. "Was he now?" His eye fell on the abandoned harp then darted back to Laera. She flushed and returned the strilling to the table. Jacerryl nodded. "It was hard enough to talk my brother into letting you take music lessons at all," he said. "You might want to keep your attention focused on the harp. It's a far more suitable instrument for a young lady than something vulgar like a screeching strilling."

"Vulgar?" Tycho felt himself flush as well. "Screeching?"

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A strilling has more expression than any tinkling, bloody harp. There's nothing vulgar—"

"The harp," said Jacerryl coolly, "is the only thing my brother wants you teaching Laera. The only thing. Could I have a

word with you in private?" He gestured for Tycho to follow him and went back out through the doors. Tycho glanced at Laera. She grimaced and stuck out her tongue at her uncle's back then winked at Tycho. He grinned but quickly suppressed it and went after Jacerryl.

The library opened off the rather grand entrance hall of the Dantakain house, a tall space of light and great pots sporting arrangements of evergreen boughs in pale imitation of summer greenery. Jacerryl said nothing as he closed the library doors behind them and nodded Tycho into the shadow of one of the potted arrangements. "I mean that, you know," he whispered. "I got you this job by assuring Mard that you were completely trustworthy and nothing untoward would happen with Laera."

"You said you wanted her taught worldly manners," Tycho shot back. "And she's going to come off as a backwater bumpkin if she doesn't know how to flirt. All she knew before I started teaching her she had learned from bad ballads and silly tales of chivalry." He jerked his head toward the library's closed doors. "She's got talent, but she just tried to play The Pirate King as if it were a romance!"

Jacerryl's eyes went wide. He just barely managed to turn a chuckle into an indignant cough. Tycho crossed his arms and gave him a glare. "I didn't teach her that."

"I don't think you did." Jacerryl wiped his eyes. "You better not let Mard catch you giving Laera such personal instruction, though. He's not a forgiving soul."

"Trust me, I won't. Don't worry, I have everything with Laera completely under control. Nothing will get out of hand. This job has too many benefits." Tycho looked Jacerryl over. "You didn't bring me out here just to talk to me, did you?"

Jacerryl reached inside the doublet that he wore and pulled out a small tin tube about a handspan in length. The top of it was capped with a plug; a green cord wrapped lengthwise around the whole tube held it firmly in place. "For delivery to

our mutual friend," he said quietly. "As soon as possible. I believe he has buyers already waiting."

"What's inside?" Tycho took the tube and gave it a very gentle shake. A faint rattle came from within. "Beljurils," Jacerryl said. "All the way from Calimshan."

Tycho blinked and pressed his lips together, impressed. Beljurils were deep water-green gems, possessed of their own natural winking light. He had once seen a necklace of them, a fantastic flashing collar, at a ball in the Ches-sentan city of Cimbar. They were stunningly precious. Just one could buy half a block of the sagging buildings in dockside—or a grand home in a better part of Spandeliyon. There had to be several in the tube. A fortune! And for his role in delivering them, Tycho would receive only five coins of gold.

His life wouldn't be worth a shaved penny if he tried to hold even one jewel back.

He undid the knot on the cord and eased the plug out. A twist of silk was wadded into the tube. Tycho shook it out and unfolded it carefully. Eight gems gleamed at him. He swallowed. "Is that the right number?" he asked Jacerryl. The other man nodded. Tycho swallowed again and wrapped the gems back up, returning the silk to the tube, replacing the cap, and binding the green cord around the whole thing once more. "All right then. I'll take them over as soon as I'm finished with Laera's—"

Down at the end of the entry hall, there was a loud hammering on the house's great doors. Tycho closed his mouth and palmed the tube, deftly slipping it up his sleeve as a servant came rushing past to answer the door. He gave Jacerryl a curt nod and the two men separated, Jacerryl turning to go deeper into the house, Tycho back to the library and Laera. He was reaching for the door handle when he heard the servant at the door sniff in distaste and say coldly, "Beggars are considered at the kitchen door." It was the heavily accented response, however, that made Tycho freeze and turn in disbelief.

"I'm not a beggar. I want to see Mard Dantakain." Li stared at the servant, a delicate, long-nosed man. "Is this his house?"

The man hesitated. "Yes."

"Is he at home?"

The servant's gaze slid down the length of his nose. "Is he expecting you?" "No, but—"

"Then he is not at home." The servant began to swing the door shut.

Li ground his teeth and stepped forward, hitting the door with his full weight, knocking it wide once more, and sending the servant reeling. "I have important business," he roared. "Is Mard Dantakain not the captain of your city guard? / want to see him!"

It had not been a good morning. His stolen clothes smelled extremely bad and were very possibly infested with vermin. The boots were too small and one had a substantial hole in the sole. His stomach was empty and growling with hunger. He had spent considerable time skulking about the snowy streets hunting for a guard station or a member of the city guard while avoiding the notice of people as best he could. After his encounter with Lander last night, how could he know who was or was not associated with Brin?

The peak of his humiliation had been turning a corner and literally running into Steth, the captain who had brought him from Telflamm. To the captain's credit, he had managed to keep a straight face when he recognized Li in his stinking, stolen clothes. "Run of bad luck?" he had asked.

Li had not risen to the bait. "I'm looking for a guard station," he had said simply.

Steth had directed him around the corner and down two blocks. "I'm in port for a few days until I go back to Telflamm," the captain had called after him. "I still have room on the return voyage if you need passage." Li had not responded to that at all.

The guards at the station had been no help. A disheveled-looking guard had glanced at him as he entered, then had simply looked away. Li had stepped up and informed him that he was in need of assistance—only to have the man ignore him entirely. He had been in the middle of repeating his request, slowly and with great care, when the guard had finally looked up. "I heard you the first time, elf-blood," he had grunted.

Li had very nearly lost his temper. It had taken great restraint to explain politely that he had no elf blood, that he was Shou, and that he had been attacked in the night. The guard had listened with disinterest. He had only perked up when Li said he knew the name of the man who had attacked him. "Who?" he had asked.

"His name is Lander. He works for a halfling named Brin."

He hadn't even gotten a chance to explain that he was looking for Brin before the guard had burst out laughing. The guard had then shouted something to his colleagues, who had also burst out laughing.

Then they all threw Li out of the station and left him to flounder in the snow. When he tried to storm back inside, the guard had very seriously threatened him with arrest.

He had left the vicinity of the docks. If Brin had such a hold on the area that even the guards seemed to be on his side, maybe he needed to look elsewhere to find help. Li had headed inland, away from the water and toward the taller buildings he had seen from Steth's ship. He felt more confident here approaching people—though many of them now avoided him—and inquiries had directed him to a much larger guard station. This time the guard hadn't greeted him with disdain as an elf-blood. Instead, he had been firmly dismissed as a vagrant who had wandered up from the docks. Knowing better than to name Brin and Lander again, Li had drawn himself up stiffly and, with the relentless formality that never failed to produce results with the bureaucracy of Shou Lung, had demanded the guards do

their duty in finding the men who had robbed him.

The only thing the demand produced was more laughter. Red-faced with rage, Li had held himself in check until the guards' laughter had settled down then he asked who their commander was and where he could find him. "Oh," one guard had said quickly, "you'll be wanting to speak to Mard Dantakain. He's the Captain of the Guard. He'll most likely be at home right now. You just march right up to hightown and ask for him. Can't miss his house." He walked over to the door and pointed farther into the heart of Spandeliyon to a small but solid fortress. "He lives right beside the citadel."

Li had stalked out with laughter ringing in his ears once more.

That wasn't going to happen again. As Mard Dan-takain's startled doorman recovered himself and more servants began to appear, Li stepped into the entrance hall and stood tall, trying to imagine that the filthy clothes he wore were actually a formal maitung robe embroidered with the symbols of his ministry and rank. "I am Kuang Li Chien of the city of Keelung in the Hai Yuan province of the Great Empire of Shou Lung," he thundered, "and I serve the Son of Heaven in the Department of Lost Treasures !" He glared down at the servants and anger lent him exaggeration. "I represent Shou Lung in this place and I demand to speak with Mard Dantakain!"

"I'm Mard Dantakain."

The voice that filled the hall was confident, commanding, and very clearly irritated. The gathered servants fell quiet. Li looked up. At the head of a flight of stairs ascending to the second floor of the house stood a tall man with a strong build. His face was hard and sour. He wore an open vest and held papers in both hands, as if he had just risen from work at a desk. Li immediately bent in a formal bow. "Honored sir, I—"

He hadn't gotten more than a few words out before the

servants swarmed him, seizing him by the arms and shoulders. Li roared again and tried to shake them off, but they had a solid grip. The best he could manage was to heave himself upright again—only to find Mard Dantakain right in front of him. "Well," he said in a low tone, "you're speaking to me. Now tell me why I shouldn't have you thrown in jail for invading my home."

Li struggled for dignity. "Honored sir," he said with all the grace he could muster, "I was told you are captain of the city guard. I need your help—I was robbed not long after arriving in your city last night and—"

"Robbed? Robbed where?"

"By the docks."

Mard frowned and his face creased into deep lines as if well-used to the expression. "What in Helm's name were you doing down there?"

"I... " Words failed him. He held his head high and bluffed. "I am a representative of Shou Lung. What I was doing there is the business of me and my emperor."

The lines on Mard's face only grew deeper. "So you're some kind of ambassador?"

Li hesitated for a heartbeat and then nodded. Impersonating an imperial ambassador. He would have been executed if he tried this in Shou Lung! So far away, though, there was no one to know any different. At his nod, though, Mard's eyes flicked up and down and settled on Li's face once more.

"Where's your staff?" he asked. "I never met an ambassador without a retinue that could fill a room." His nose wrinkled in disgust. "And what happened to your clothes?"

"I was robbed," Li said again. He clenched his teeth and hissed his words between them. "My clothes were stolen. I need your help. I have been to two guard stations this morning and was thrown out of both."

"You're close to being thrown out of here as well!" Mard snarled. "If I take you up to the citadel, will Kargil Ninton recognize you?"

Li blinked and hesitated again. This time, though, he must have hesitated too long because Mard crushed the papers in his hand and spat, "Lord Kargil Ninton, First Consul of Spandeliyon! The man any ambassador to Spandeliyon would go to see!" He spun around sharply and nodded to the servant who had opened the door. "Get him out of here!" He marched back down the hall toward the stairs. Li stared after him, open-mouthed—and for the first time registered the black-haired man who stood to one side of the hall, watching and listening. Tychoben Arisaenn!

"Wait!" Li called. "Wait!" He pulled against the servants who were trying to haul him back toward the door and managed to get one arm free. He pointed desperately toward Tycho. "He knows me! He knows I was robbed last night. He dug me out of the snow!"

Mard stopped. The servants stopped. All eyes turned to Tycho.

The singer gave Li a single cold glance, his mouth set hard and tight. He turned to Mard Dantakain and raised his eyebrows innocently. "He's mad," Tycho said. "I've never seen him before in my life."

Rage fell on Li like a toppling wall of red-hot iron bricks. He was vaguely conscious of screaming something incoherent at Tycho, of snapping the elbow of his free arm into the face of one servant trying to grab him and stomping down sharply on the shin of the man who was still holding him. Then suddenly he was free as servants shouted and scrambled away. "Mad? Mad? " Li howled and hurled himself at Tycho.

The singer flinched back, raising his hands and opening his mouth. Li had fought spellcasters before, though. He dropped fast and swept out with a leg to knock Tycho's feet out from under him, but Tycho yelped and managed to hop and dance over the sweep. Li bounced up instantly and grabbed a fistful of Tycho's shirt before he could recover his balance. He hauled him in close and

smacked him hard across the face. "You lying dog!" he spat in Shou. "You hairy, lying—"

Hands and arms grabbed him from behind. Li lashed out with his arm to the back and right and a lean man with a resemblance to Mard Dantakain went staggering back, one hand clutching his nose. A swift kick straight back should have caught another attacker, but didn't. This time Li caught a glimpse of the Captain of the Guard himself. Mard's face was dark red and angry as he dodged back expertly and closed again with his arms held wide. The Shou shot down, pulling a dazed Tycho over his head to receive Mard's grapple in his place. The impact slammed them all into a pair of doors that gave way under their combined weight and tumbled them into the room beyond.

They found themselves face to face with a beautiful young woman posed seductively on a broad table, a harp in her arms, her dress pulled down to show her shoulders and tucked up to expose her knees.

Li simply stopped, still crouched low, startled more than stunned. Tycho, down beside him, froze and made a strangled noise. Behind them both, Mard froze as well. For a heartbeat, they all just stared at the young woman. She stared back in shock.

Mard Dantakain let out a window-rattling roar, grabbed Li's head with his left hand, Tycho's with his right, and cracked them hard together.

CHAPTER 4

o had been thrown in jail—briefly—many times during his life. He had seen the inside of Spandeli-yon's dockside guard station fairly frequently during his later childhood. After Veseene had taken him as her apprentice, he had seen the inside of many similar jails, from east to west around the Sea of Fallen Stars. It was something of a hazard of the itinerant lifestyle. He had seen jails that were kept fastidiously clean. He had seen jails that made stables look pleasant. He had seen jails that were run with efficient cruelty and those run

with casual disorder. In Tantras, he had passed a night in a jail that put each prisoner into their own bare little cell, almost like monks in a monastery. In Raven's Bluff, just down the coast, he had been flung into a prison that was little more than a vast building with one lock on the outer door and prisoners swarming loose within; he had been forgotten there for almost a tenday before Veseene managed to find him.

He had never before, however, been thrown into a jail cell normally reserved for traitors, assassins, and other dangerous, desperate types. Spandeliyon's middle town guard station had precisely one very highly secured cell. Among the folk of dockside—and even the middle town—it was a thing of rumor and speculation, mockingly referred to as "the King's Chamber." If Tycho had been in a better mood, he might have taken greater note of the place, maybe with an eye to embellishing on its rather ordinary appearance and using the experience to earn himself a few extra pennies at the Wench's Ease.

But he wasn't and he didn't.

"—acting like a horse that's been turned into an ore and made even more stupid] Tycho ranted for the seventh or eighth time. The words came out slurred. His lower lip was split and swollen where Li Chien had hit him. He rattled the manacles that chained him to the wall of the cell and held his arms suspended like a marionette. "Locked up for what? Because you apparently don't have the sense to be civil. Idiot!"

He glared across the cell, a matter of only about ten feet, at Li Chien. The King's Chamber was solid stone, with no features to it other than a heavy, steel-bound door and an assortment of chains hammered into the stark walls with stout pins. It was dark, the only light coming from a lantern on the other side of a small, barred window in the door. There was nothing between Tycho's behind and the wintercold floor except the fabric of his breeches. Li Chien

was in no better situation. Somehow, though, he managed to look as if imprisonment bothered him not a bit. His smooth face was calm, his posture relaxed. He said nothing. His eyes were even closed. Tycho might almost have thought that he was asleep except that every so often his ears twitched slightly at a particularly vile insult. It was the most reaction Tycho had managed to get out of him since they had been bundled out of the Dantakain house, bags over their heads and their arms bound, and marched through the snow. Tycho had caught the sound of Laera pleading and screaming with her father and of Jacerryl trying to argue with Mard. The only words to escape the captain of the guard's lips, however, had been a few terse commands for the captives to be searched and for Tycho's strilling and other effects to be collected and sent to the guard station. Unseen hands had taken everything from him—even the tube of beljurils. He had struggled at that, but Jacerryl's voice had been in his ear. "Don't worry. Mard might be furious, but he sticks to the law like honey. They'll be safe."

The trip through the snowbound streets had been remarkably short. They had been in the King's Chamber before the daze of having his head cracked against Li Chien's had even worn off.

His anger at Li Chien, however, had yet to fade. "I mean, going up to hightown in clothes that smell like beer and fish guts, walking right up to Mard Dantakain's house, and demanding to see him—just what did you think, that he was going to welcome you with open arms?" Through the shadows, Tycho caught a tightening of the muscles along Li Chien's jaw. He growled. "I know you can hear me, Li Chien." He switched to Shou. "Maybe you've just been having trouble understanding me—I said that you've got the brains of a horse, the grace of an ore, and the gratitude of a rabid weasel!"

Li Chien's eyes popped open and he sucked in air. His entire

body seemed to clench at once "And you," he seethed in an explosion of rage, "are a liar with all the morals of a rutting goat! You were sleeping with the man's daughter!"

The venom in his voice was wasted. "I never even kissed Laera!" Tycho shot back.

"It looked like she was ready for more than a kiss."

"That wasn't my doing! If I'd gone into that library on my own, I wouldn't have let anything happen." A tiny whisper of doubt tickled Tycho's mind but he thrust it away. He would have rebuffed Laera's advances. "This is your fault," he said. "You attacked me, remember?"

"You lied to Mard Dantakain!" spat Li Chien. "You knew I was telling the truth and you lied. All you had to do was tell him what happened last night and—"

Tycho leaned forward sharply. If the chains hadn't held him back, he might have lunged at Li Chien. "What happened last night? You mean how you insulted me, ignored every attempt I made at warning you, and then, when I saved your life, how you snuck away like a thief without even saying 'thank you'?" He wrenched fruitlessly on his chains. "You're right, I should have supported you—O Emissary of Imperial Shou Lung! You want to talk about lies, how about that one? If you're an ambassador, I'm the Witch-Queen of Aglarond!"

Li Chien started to snap a reply but stopped. His face fell and he looked away. "That lie is between Mard Dantakain and me," he said stubbornly. "But for walking away from you this morning—" He glanced up again and Tycho was startled to see that anger was actually fading from his face and a look of shame taking its place. "—I apologize. What I did was no way to repay your kindness. I'm very sorry. You are right to be angry."

For the first time in a very long while, Tycho found his mouth opening and closing in speechless astonishment. "Well," he managed finally. "All right then."

He sat back against the cold wall and just looked at Li Chien.

The Shou looked back. Neither of them said anything. Uncomfortable silence hung in the air—until Li Chien's stomach broke it with a loud, hollow growl that echoed off the stone walls. He flushed. "Excuse me. I haven't eaten."

"It might be a while before you do. I don't know if they'll bring us anything before dinner." He turned his gaze up to the ceiling of the cell, almost lost in the darkness. It was hard to tell what time it was. His own stomach was empty, though. He'd guess that it was at least well into the afternoon now. "Are you an ambassador, Li Chien?" he asked.

"Just Li, Tycho. Li Chien is what my mother calls me." The Shou sighed. "I'm no ambassador. I'm just a clerk in the imperial bureaucracy."

Tycho raised his eyebrows. "You fight well for just a clerk."

"You healed me, didn't you? Are you just a singer?"

"True enough." Tycho shifted and his chains rattled again.

"So what brings an imperial clerk all the way from Shou Lung to Altumbel?" Li said nothing. Tycho looked at him. The Shou had his head down and was staring at the floor between his knees. "Not the sort of thing you can talk about?" Tycho shrugged. Li shook his head. "That's fair."

"Tycho," said Li without looking up, "tell me about Brin. Is there anyone in Spandeliyon who isn't afraid of him?"

"Mard Dantakain. Crazy old Riverhand the Sage out on the edge of town. A few people in the middle and high-towns who haven't actually heard of him, maybe. Anyone with any sense is afraid of Brin. He came to Spandeliyon

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just about a year ago and set himself up by finding the biggest gang boss in dockside and burning his house down. With him inside. Then he just moved in and took over. He's slick. When he doesn't want to be linked to something, he'll trick someone into doing his dirty business, but when he wants to make a point, he makes it in a very big way. A lot of people in dockside and middle town who cross him have

problems with knives. Or pigs." "Pigs?"

"Brin passes himself off as a swineherd. He even likes to do his business in a sty. I don't know who he's trying to fool, but it sure gives him a crazy edge. People aren't just scared of him because he's mean. They're scared of him because there's a very good chance he might be insane, too."

"What about you? Are you scared of him?"

"Witless. It's the only smart way." Tycho considered Li for a moment. "You know, for someone who's looking for Brin, you don't seem to know a lot about him."

"I don't. I only heard about him in Telflamm—rumors that said he was here in Spandeliyon." He hesitated then added. "Brin isn't actually the reason I came west from Shou Lung. He's just a link."

Tycho had to stop himself from leaning forward too eagerly. "Oh?" he asked. "A link to what?" He tried to dredge up everything he had heard about Brin's career as a pirate before the one-eyed halfling had come to Spandeliyon. There were always tales linking pirates to fantastic treasure hordes... and what had Li said back in Mard Dan-takain's entrance hall? That he served the bureaucracy of Shou Lung in the Department of Lost Treasures? Li was biting his lip in uncertainty. Tycho waited, giving him his time, not wanting to pressure him and lose this tale.

It wasn't to be. Just as Li swallowed, drew breath, and opened his mouth, there was noise out in the corridor. Footsteps. The rattle of keys in locks. Li's mouth closed firmly. Tycho ground his teeth in frustration. Patience, he told himself, patience.

The door opened and three figures stepped into the cell. With the lantern in the corridor behind them they were nothing but silhouettes for a moment. "Magistrate will see you now," said one as the other two moved forward with more keys. Light splashed across guard uniforms marked with the crest of the city. "On your feet."

Li, however, was already leaping up with a clatter of chains

and a sharp storm of Shou curses. The guards, two men and a woman, jumped back, hands reaching for weapons. Tycho came to his feet as well. "Li!" he said in Shou. "Calm down! They're just here to—"

"I know her, Tycho! I saw her last night." Li pointed an arm at the woman guard. "She's in Lander's pay!"

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A woman's face emerging from shadows and falling snow, torchlight showing a uniform—a guard uniform, Li realized now. "She came past last night while Lander and his men were robbing me," he spat at Tycho, "and just left when Lander told her it was Brin's business and paid her off!"

Blood was pounding in his head. He tried to reach forward with both hands, but the chains binding him made it impossible. "She's corrupt! She's—"

Tycho looked startled but also shook his head sharply. "Li, it's all right! They're taking us before a magistrate, that's all. Be quiet or you'll just make things worse. If we're lucky we could be out of here soon." He twisted around to face the guard who had stayed by the door, clearly the leader of the trio. "The Shou is confused," the singer said quickly in the common tongue of the west. "I'm trying to calm him down."

"You speak his language? You tell him we don't want any trouble, but we're ready for it." The guard pulled out a club and held it up where Li could see it. "No trouble," he said loudly. "You understand?"

"Got that?" Tycho asked in Shou.

Li clenched his teeth and nodded. Chained and helpless, there was little he could do anyway. He did not, however, take his eyes off the woman guard. "I don't trust her," he growled.

"You don't have to. Just stay calm. Let me do the talking and I'll get us both out of this."

There didn't seem to be any other choice. Li swallowed his anger and stood still as one of the guards, a thick-necked

man approached him warily. His arms were freed from the chains, and bound together in front of him. The corrupt woman guard treated Tycho the same way, though perhaps with a little less fear. When both of them were ready, the third guard led the way out of the cell, down an ugly, damp hallway, and up a flight of narrow stairs.

Li was marched along in the middle of the group. As they ascended the stairs, he heard the woman's voice murmuring behind him. "Hey Tycho, they say you were carrying on with Dantakain's daughter. 'S true?"

"I wouldn't call it carrying on, Desmada. The young lady was just an enthusiastic student."

Li twisted around for a second to look over his shoulder at Tycho and the guard. "You know her?" he asked in Shou.

"Hush!" Tycho said sharply. "I know a lot of people. Now be quiet!"

The exchange earned them both a hard glance from the leading guard and Li a rough jerk on the arm by the guard at his side. Li did, however, manage to lock eyes with the woman guard—Desmada—just briefly.

There was nothing in her gaze except vague curiosity.

Li turned back around and kept shuffling along under his guard's guidance. His mind, though, was on Desmada. She didn't recognize him. How was that possible? It had been dim last night, he supposed, and she had only caught a brief glimpse of him before Lander had run her off. He had probably looked rather different, too, beaten and bruised. Still, there was something disconcerting in her lack of recognition. Could she really care so little as to pay no attention to a man being beaten on her watch?

And Tycho treated her as if nothing were out of the ordinary. The more he saw of the ways of Spandeliyon, the less he liked the town.

The stairs led into another short corridor, from which a door let them all into a large room filled with the dazzle of sunlight. After so long in the dim shadows of the cell, the

light was almost blinding. They were marched a short distance and stopped. "Prisoners Tychoben Arisaenn and Kangli Shen, magistrate," said the lead guard, completely mangling Li's name.

"Blessed Tyr," came a wheezing voice out of the glare, "nobody said he was elf-blood."

Li squinted against the light and looked around. They were in a vaulted chamber dominated by tall windows in one wall and an imposing raised dais on another. On the dais was a very large and heavy chair. Seated in it was a very tall and thin old man in severe robes. Li fixed him with a frustrated glare. "I am not an elf!"

In the shadow of the great chair, another man rapped a heavy rod against the floor. "Respect for the magistrate!" Li immediately received two hard pokes in the side, one from the guard who stood on his left and one from Tycho on his right. The singer also gave him a scowl and a short hiss for silence.

Up on the dais, the old man winced at the banging. "Thank you, Dorth. Why have they been arrested?"

The man with the rod glanced at a parchment. "For brawling, sir. Assault on the Captain of the Guard. Kuang Li Chien—" He pronounced the name carefully and with a haughty glance at the lead guard. "—is also arrested for forcibly entering a private residence and for impersonating an official of a foreign government. Tychoben Arisaenn also for moral corruption of Laera Dantakain."

"Moral corruption?" The magistrate sat up a little. "I haven't heard that one in a while."

There was a slight snicker from the guards present. Bang! went the rod. "Respect for the magistrate! Captain of the Guard Mard Dantakain will present his case!"

Mard Dantakain stepped up from behind them. He was dressed in a full and ornate guard uniform, immaculately clean. He related the events of the morning in a blunt, matter-of-fact tone, leaving nothing out and neither

exaggerating nor diminishing anything. Li felt his heart sink. Considered in hindsight and with a cooler head, what he had done was nothing short of stupid. Barging into Mard Dantakain's house wearing clothes stolen from a drunk, trying to pass himself off as an ambassador of Shou Lung when half the population of Spandeliyon apparently couldn't distinguish a Shou from an elf it was, he realized, lucky they were getting any kind of trial at all. If Li had been in the magistrate's place, he probably would have left them down in the darkness of their cell!

By the time Mard had finished speaking, he felt sick.

"Prisoners Tychoben Arisaenn and Kuang Li Chien will respond!"

Li swallowed and stepped forward, ready to confess to everything. Tycho, however, was faster. He took two steps forward, poking Li again on the way past, and made a graceful bow that hardly seemed hampered at all by his bonds. "Magistrate Vanyan," he said in a very grand voice.

The magistrate gave a thin, slightly confused smile. "Have we met before?"

< "Your name precedes you, sir. Your wisdom is well known in dockside. If it please you, I will speak for both myself and this esteemed gentleman of Shou." He gestured toward Li.

"During our imprisonment, we discovered that we share a common tongue and I was able to discuss the situation with him. This is all really a terrible mistake stemming from his imperfect understanding of our language."

"Wait," protested Mard Dantakain, "he understood Common perfectly well when I spoke to him. He spoke it back to me!"

Tycho glanced at him and raised his eyebrows.

"Did he, Captain Dantakain? Your testimony to the esteemed magistrate was remarkable in its precision. Did you rehearse it?"

"Yes."

"Master Kuang did the same with the appeal he presented to you this morning. If I asked you to tell me right now in the

same detail what happened to you yesterday morning, could you?" Li saw Mard look to Vanyan in confusion, but Tycho gave neither of them time to reply. "I didn't think so." He looked to the magistrate as well. "The same thing happened with Master Kuang, sir. He perfected a limited speech, but was flustered when Captain Dantakain began to challenge his appeal for help. Please, sir, I'm afraid Captain Dantakain has overestimated Master Kuang's comprehension."

The magistrate's eyes narrowed. "Indeed." He turned to Li. "Master Kuang, have you understood what is happening here?"

Both Tycho and Mard turned to look at him as well. Li swallowed again and cursed silently. Tycho's mouth was twitching just slightly. Was that supposed to mean yes or no? It seemed as if Tycho wanted him to play dumb. "No," he said, guessing.

Tycho winced. Vanyan sat back. "The elf-blood understands enough to know that he does not understand. It seems to me his exchange with the captain this morning was less complex than what takes place in this chamber. Lack of comprehension does not strike me as sufficient excuse for his behavior."

"Sir, he was also confused," Tycho replied quickly. "He had by his own admission just been savagely robbed and was also, I have learned, desperately hungry. In that state, he was focused on only one thing and would say anything to obtain it. I believe if you test him further, you'll find that even the basic comprehension you assume is lacking." The magistrate frowned and look at Li again.

"What is my name?" he said slowly and with emphasis. Tycho turned as well. This time his eyes flicked over his shoulder and toward the dais. His right hand made a tight shaking motion. No, a rapping motion.

Li put on a pleasant smile and bowed. "Your name is Respect," he said in an accent so thick it made him cringe.

"Respect the Magistrate!"

The guards chuckled immediately. On the dais, Dorth slammed his rod down. "Respect for the magistrate!" he said automatically and flushed. In response, Li folded his arms and bent in an even deeper bow.

"Respect the Magistrate!" he repeated.

"No, respect for him!" Dorth pointed desperately at Vanyan. "Respect him".

"Yes," Li agreed. "He is Respect. Respect the Magistrate!"

Dorth was practically shaking with frustration. Mard was red. The guards were desperately trying to hold in laughter. Even the magistrate seemed amused. Tycho was suppressing a smile. "That's enough," he told Li in Shou. "They got the point."

"If we get out of this," replied Li in a pleasant tone, "I'm going to beat you senseless."

"I'll worry about that later. Pretend I'm telling you Vanyan's real name now."

Li changed his smile to an expression of surprise and horror, bent into the deepest bow yet, and switched back to Common. "I am very sorry, honored sir. Your name is Vanyan. Vanyan the Magistrate. I am very sorry."

"You see, sir?" Tycho told the magistrate. "And this morning he didn't properly understand what Captain Dantakain was saying to him either. When the captain asked him if he was an ambassador from Shou, he completely misunderstood. He is in fact a member of the Shou imperial bureaucracy and so it could be said that he does represent Shou Lung. He called on Captain Dantakain because it seemed proper at the time to go to the most senior member of the Guard. And in his confused state, he mistook me for someone else. When I replied that I didn't know him, he took my words for an insult and was

justifiably very angry. It was all just a misunderstanding. Indeed, we have already made our peace." Tycho clapped an arm amiably around Li's shoulder's.

Mard Dantakain practically exploded. "Now hold on," he sputtered. "That's not right!" He thrust a finger at Li. "Magistrate, I swear to you that when I talked to this man this morning, he absolutely understood everything I said. Everything! And now you expect me to believe that it was all just a clever imitation like... like a talking parrot!" He spun to glare at Vanyan. "I demand you put an end to this!"

The magistrate just tilted his head. Dorth, on the other hand, drew a shocked breath and raised his rod, ready to rap it again. Vanyan reached out and caught his arm. "I think we've had enough of that, Dorth." He looked down at Mard. "Very well, captain. I will end it." He pushed himself to his feet in front of the heavy chair of his office. "I have heard the testimony of both parties," he said formally, "and I am satisfied by what I have heard. It seems to me that no harm was intended and no damage inflicted that has not been resolved. Under the laws of Altumbel and Spandeliyon, I find no reason to hold Tychoben Arisaenn on the charges of brawling and assault nor Kuang Li Chien on the same as well as forcible entry and impersonation."

Mard howled in protest even as Dorth finally brought his staff down again and proclaimed "The magistrate has ruled!" At Li's side, Tycho let out a whoop of triumph. Li, however, grabbed his arm out of the air.

"You're forgetting something!" he hissed in Shou, nodding toward the magistrate's dais. Vanyan was still standing and he was looking back at them again.

"There is," the magistrate said somberly, "the matter of the additional charge against Tychoben Arisaenn: moral corruption of Laera Dantakain." He seated himself once more. "I have not heard your testimony on that charge, Master Arisaenn. It does seem to me that Captain Dantakain has a legitimate complaint against you."

Mard swung around to glare at Tycho, vicious victory on his face. Tycho blinked, but swept into another graceful bow without hesitation. Li found himself holding his breath as the

singer smiled and began, "Honored sir, Captain Dantakain has simply never before seen the famous 'vigorous harp' technique of Waterdeep... "

"Tycho, is that really how ladies of quality play the harp in Waterdeep?" asked Li as they walked out of the guard station and into afternoon sunlight.

"If they don't, they should learn. It sounds like an interesting technique. If I ever get to Waterdeep, maybe I'll teach them." Tycho drew a deep breath of cold, fresh air. It smelled very good. He hitched his coat around himself and adjusted his strilling under its leather flap. True to Jacerryl's word, everything that had been taken from them—or rather from Tycho since Li had nothing to take—had been waiting for them when they walked out of Magistrate Vanyan's chamber. The little tin tube of beljurils included.

Tycho had sighed with relief, given it a quick shake, and sighed again at the sound of muffled rattling within. It had been hard enough worrying about getting himself and Li out of jail without worrying about the gems and their now belated delivery as well!

Li was looking back at the jail with a certain amount of frustration. Tycho stopped. "What?" he asked.

"That guard—Desmada. It doesn't seem right to walk away without revealing her corruption. She took Lander's coin to look the other way. In Shou Lung, she wouldn't get away with that!"

"You're telling me that there isn't one guard in Shou Lung who accepts bribes?" Tycho shook his head. "Desmada works for Brin, Li. If you had tried to bring up her corruption, we'd still be sitting in that cell."

"Does everyone in Spandeliyon work for Brin?"

Tycho grimaced. "A lot of people do," he said. "But only a few people do it willingly." He slapped Li's shoulder. "Don't worry. Some people work for his rivals!"

"That's very comforting."

"Tycho!" Mard Dantakain's voice echoed on the street and Tycho flinched. He turned slowly. Mard was stalking down the steps of the guard station, each pace tightly controlled as though he might fly to pieces if he let his guard down. That probably wasn't far from the truth. Tycho took a deep breath and stood his ground.

"What is it, Mard?"

"I owe you pay for this morning's lesson." He reached out and took Tycho's hand, turning it over and slapping coins into his palm with such force that the bard winced. Tycho looked down. Two gold coins stamped with circled dragons. He glanced up at Mard.

"Coins from Waterdeep."

"Indeed," replied Mard coldly. "It seemed appropriate. They'll also be your final payment. Laera's lessons are now finished. I don't want to see you at my house again." His eyes glittered and he leaned close. "In fact," he said, "I'd recommend you take care that I don't see you again at all." He glared at Li as well. "Either of you."

He turned sharply and marched away. Tycho glowered after him, but slipped the coins into his pouch anyway and sighed. Li looked at him. "I cost you your job."

Tycho shrugged. "Waves roll in; waves roll out." If he had still been traveling, he might simply have boarded the next ship to leave port and moved on to richer pickings in another town. He might have lost the pay from tutoring Laera Dantakain, but there was still the Wench's Ease and—if he could find another discrete way of meeting Jacerryl—he'd still have his delivery runs. The little tube of beljurils wouldn't be the last thing Mard's brother would bring into Spandeliyon. It would all work out. "Waves will roll in again." Li looked glum. His stomach growled audibly again. This time Tycho's grumbled in response as well. He rubbed his stomach and smiled at Li. The beljurils were already late—they could wait just a little while longer. "Come on, let me buy you something to eat. There's a place close to here." He

began leading the way through the snow.

The place was a pie shop, not especially good, but cheap and friendly. Usually friendly. The shopkeeper's face clouded as Li follow Tycho inside. "No elves," he grunted, pointing at the Shou. "Get out."

Li flushed. "He's not an elf," said Tycho. He reached up and grabbed Li's head, twisting it around and pulling his hair back to the man could see his ears. "Do those look pointed to you?" He let Li go and scowled at the shopkeeper. "Two fish pies—no, three. With two mugs of hot soup. And this man deserves more than just an apology, so that soup had better be on the house!"

The shopkeeper muttered something indistinct and busied himself behind the counter. Tycho led Li to a table, the Shou rubbing at his scalp. "What is it with you people and elves?" he demanded.

"Altumbel was founded by humans who left Aglarond when the coastal settlements stopped fighting the elves of the inland forests and made peace with them. A lot of people in Altumbel still don't like elves."

"How long ago was this?"

Tycho stretched out. "About three hundred years. People around here are stubborn. Most have never even seen anyone with elf blood unless they happen to be former pirates and have traveled. They just have this vague idea of what elves are supposed to look like." He looked Li over.

"Unfortunately... "

"Shou look that way, too." Li sighed and pressed his lips together as the shopkeeper came over with a platter bearing three fat pies, each a handspan wide, and two big mugs. The man plunked them down and got away again with unseemly haste. Li reached for one of the mugs and raised it to Tycho.

"I'm sorry we began badly, Tycho. You're the only person in Spandeliyon who has given me any help at all." He hesitated and added. "Would you be willing to help me some more?"

Tycho paused with his mug lifted halfway to his lips. "After

all this, you still want to find Brin? " ,

"No, not Brin."

"Right." Tycho nodded and blew across the steaming surface of his soup. He remembered what Li had hinted at back in the King's Chamber. "Brin's just a link. You're after his treasure."

"Treasure?" Li blinked. "I'm looking for my brother."

CHAPTER 5

hroughout Shou Lung," Li explained as they ate the pies, "my home city, Keelung, is known for two things: tea and silk." He spoke in Shou and the words rippled off his tongue with honest pride. "The Kuang family has worked in the silk trade since the earliest days of the city. We have been spinners, weavers, and dyers. We devised the unique yellow dye that made Keelung silks famous. Since that time, eldest sons have followed their fathers in the family tradition. My father, Yu Chien, is the direct descendant of the founder of the Kuang and head of the family. Records of Keelung show that Kuang have done business there for eighteen generations and family legends say that we were working with silk many generations before that."

"That's longer than Altumbellans have been hating elves," mumbled Tycho around a mouthful of pie. In his mind, though, he was kicking himself. Pirate treasure! What had he been thinking?

Li just nodded. "A few hundred years longer. Most recently, though, the Kuang have also been traders, selling the silks of Keelung to all of Shou Lung. Recently, the heads of all the silk families in Keelung made a decision that the time was right to expand our market beyond Shou Lung. They formed a trading society for that purpose and assembled an expedition that would take Keelung's goods west to Faerûn." His voice changed, becoming bitter. "In charge of the expedition was my elder brother, eldest son of the eldest son of the most respected family in Keelung. His name was Yu Mao."

Tycho swallowed before replying. "Yu Mao? You said that last night while you were raving."

Blood flushed Li's face. "I did?"

"Well, maybe not so much 'said' as 'screamed.' What happened to him?"

"What do you mean what happened?" Li asked hotly. Tycho gave him a suffering look.

"Something must have happened to Yu Mao or you wouldn't be looking for him. It doesn't take much to see that."

Li hesitated and nodded again. "You're right." He took a breath, calming himself. "The expedition left Keelung under good omens on a fine day in early spring three years ago, traveling west through Shou Lung to the province of Ch'ing Tung, where the Silver Road becomes the Golden Way leading to Faerûn. The elders of Keelung received a letter from the expedition just before it passed beyond the borders of Shou Lung. It was the last word from the expedition until early last summer, when a message arrived for my father. It bore the signature of Tieh Fa Pan, an old friend, and related grave news, of how the expedition had reached Thesk and the city of Telflamm, of how there was great interest in the silks of Keelung." Li's jaw tightened. "And of how Yu Mao decided that the expedition should extend its reach and travel just a bit farther west before the winter—a late autumn voyage across the Sea of Fallen Stars to the markets of Sembia.

"En route to Sembia, the ship on which the expedition sailed was attacked by pirates. Of the members of the expedition, only Fa Pan escaped—he was one of what we call spirit folk and blessed with the ability to breathe water. He found refuge in the sea."

*<• Tycho found himself leaning forward. "The pirates—Brin's old ship?" Li nodded once more. "What happened to the other members of the expedition?"

Li drew a deep breath. "They died," he said. "Put to the sword. All except Yu Mao." Li looked down for a moment then

up again. "Fa Pan saw Yu Mao taken aboard the pirates' ship as a hostage."

"Ah." Tycho sat back. "And Fa Pan?"

"He was wounded," Li said harshly. "What could he do? He swam for shore. Through the fall and winter he stayed with fishing folk who found him. In the spring, he made his way back to Thesk. Weakened by his ordeal and unable to travel farther, he sent the letter to my father." He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again. "It took a year to reach Keelung. By the time my father presented it to the elders of Keelung, the members of the expedition had been dead for almost two years."

"What did the elders do?" Tycho asked.

"They put on their mourning clothes and decided that the time was after all not yet right for trade with the West." Li's fist, resting on top of the table, clenched. "My father, however, wanted to know the fate of his eldest son.

I was summoned back to Keelung from my position in the bureaucracy and dispatched to the West, tracing the expedition's route to Thesk."

Tycho's eyes went wide. "I've heard that's a fantastic journey!"

Li shrugged. "It has its wonders. I was in such haste that I barely noticed the months go by. I arrived in Telflamm only a few tendays ago and sought out Fa Pan." He sighed and forced his fist to relax. "He had died not long after he sent his letter. I was fortunate, though, that he had included distinct descriptions of the pirate captain, a sorceress—and her mate, a one-eyed halfling." He nodded in response to Tycho's raised eyebrow. "Brin, of course. The people of Telflamm are more used to Shou than the people of Spandeliyon. I was able to speak with people who recognized Fa Pan's descriptions. They identified Brin, his captain, and the ship they sailed on, a vessel called the Sow."

"I've heard of Sow," said Tycho sharply. "Black sails,

wallowed like a pig, but stealthy and with ice magic behind her. She was a terror a couple of years back."

"Then maybe you also heard what I did in Telflamm: that the Sow vanished last winter. The people I spoke to told me that it was assumed the ship went down in a winter storm or maybe had been sunk by the Aglarondans. No one had heard anything of her—except for one man who had heard a rumor that a one-eyed halfling had taken up residence in Spandeliyon." Li spread his hands. "That's why I need to talk to Brin, Tycho. He's the last one who might know what happened to Yu Mao."

The Shou fell silent. Tycho let out a slow breath. "That's it?" he asked. "That's all? You really just want to talk to him?"

Li blinked. "It seems to me that should be enough," he said stiffly.

"Li, the way you acted when you walked into the Wench's Ease last night, I thought you were looking for Brin to try to kill him!"

"Oh, no," said Li. "I don't want to kill Brin." His mouth twitched into a thin smile. "At least not so far as I know."

Tycho gave Li a long look over the rim of his mug as he slurped back the last of his soup. "But you don't know. If you found out that Brin had killed Yu Mao..." He let the suggestion trail off. Li just gave him a level gaze. Tycho wrinkled his nose. "Ah. I suppose so. Look—" He sat forward. "—even if you don't actually mean Brin any harm, just talking to him could be dangerous."

Li put his hands flat on the table and looked Tycho straight in the eye. "It's a chance I'll take, Tycho. You know how far I've traveled. Am I supposed to stop now?" He sat forward as well. "I would value your help, but with you or without you, I will find Brin. I get the feeling that he won't be that hard to locate."

"Aw, bind me." Tycho set his mug down with a thump. By rights, he should let Li blunder off and get himself in trouble—certainly the Shou had brought him nothing but trouble.

At the same time, he felt a certain grudging respect for him and his commitment. He sighed. I'm going to regret this, he thought to himself—and nodded. "I'll help you."

The Shou broke out in the first wide and genuine smile Tycho had seen from him. Tycho held a warning hand before he could get too happy, though. "But," he said firmly, "this is how we're going to do it." He jerked a thumb at himself. "I'm going to make inquiries. Something discrete. Throw out a line and see if I can arrange a meeting with Brin for you. It might make him feel more like talking civilly than having a big foreigner stalking him around Spandeliyon will."

Li's smile tightened slightly. "Don't mention Yu Mao." Tycho looked at him quizzically. "I want to ask Brin about Yu Mao myself," said Li stubbornly. "I don't want to give him time to prepare any stories or explanations." Tycho shrugged then nodded. Li's smile bloomed again, even wider this time. He bent himself in a little half-bow over the table. "Thank you, Tycho. I wish there were something more I could offer you—if Lander hadn't robbed me, the reward I mentioned last night would be yours."

Tycho snorted and picked up the last morsel of pie. "Well, that reward was as good as stolen as soon as you said the words last night at the Ease. That was stupid."

"What good is a reward if no one knows it's available?" Li folded his hands. "Besides, it was well hidden. If anyone has my coat, they're probably walking around with a small fortune and aren't even aware of it."

Tycho blinked. "What was this reward?" he asked around the pie.

"I had three fine rubies sewn into the lining of my coat," said Li. "I thought they would be safe. I underestimated the desperation of thieves in Spandeliyon."

Suddenly the pie was dry in Tycho's mouth. "Three rubies?"

"I would have given one as a reward last night. To you, Tycho, I would give all three."

Fingers shaking, Tycho reached for his pouch and pulled out one of the gold coins Mard had given him, hesitated for a moment, and pulled out the second as well. Hiding them with his palm, he slid them across the table to Li. "Lander," he said as casually as he could manage, "usually sells stolen goods to a fence named Giras." He pointed. "You'll find his shop three streets that way and two back toward dockside. Go see if he still has your coat."

Li's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You didn't ask," said Tycho quickly, "and we were talking about other things. I would have suggested it anyway, though." Li's expression conveyed disbelief. "Really!" Tycho protested. "Remember, I said I'd help you before you said anything about a reward."

Li grunted. "That's true." He nodded. "All right." / "Besides, the clothes you're wearing now stink." Tycho stood up and slapped payment for their food onto the table-top. "Look," he told Li. "You go get your coat back—and anything else you can, too." He dredged his pouch for any remaining coins and came up with a scant handful of copper and silver. He gave them all to Li. "Try to be discrete about it. Then go back to the Wench's Ease and wait for me. I'll meet you there later with news."

Li stood up as well. "Thank you, Tycho."

"Thank me when you've had your talk with Brin, Li."

They left the pie shop and Tycho made sure Li got started in the right direction before turning and going the other way. Once the Shou was out of sight, though, he swiftly changed direction and headed down toward dock-side, whistling as he walked.

Three rubies for a conversation. That was a very good deal. He tapped the tin tube tucked into his coat. It was high time to deliver the beljurils to their waiting—and not especially patient—new owner.

He was even still whistling when he walked through the door of the Eel.

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Lander choked as his spade broke through the icy crust and exposed another soft patch of slowly decaying pig dung. He gasped against the stench and levered the spadeful of manure up and into his wheelbarrow. The relief as the load slid off was like a small blessing; the spade seemed to rise up an extra foot on its own. Lander swung it back to the ground, letting the blade bang down into the filth, and leaned for a moment against the handle.

"Did I tell you to take a break, Lander?" Brin's rich voice was punctuated by the hiss of his switch through the air. Lander stifled a groan and scraped up another load of manure. As Brin's punishments went, mucking out his sty was one of the more pleasant. That didn't mean Lander liked it. His arms, shoulders, and back burned. He was sweating like ... well, like a pig. In spite of the cold, his mantle and outer shirt were flung across Brin's table, draped over the damn Shou saber. He knew he should have sold it to Giras! What had keeping it gotten him? A frantic search through dockside in the middle of the night. Another search this morning, combing the streets all the way up into middle town. He'd even made contact with the usual bodysnatchers, unpleasant specimens who would be better off dead themselves. Even they hadn't seen anything of Li Chien's body though. And Brin had ordered him to not bring his men in on the search. Lander knew what that meant: the halfling wanted to keep his interest in the Shou quiet.

Since early afternoon, however, he'd been shoveling manure. Brin might appreciate hard work, but he still didn't like failure. Lander snuck a look over his shoulder. Brin was sitting on the table again, a tankard of the Eel's ale beside him and his switch in his hand. He was tickling Black Scratch under the chin. The boar ignored him and just sat like some weird beast-king, surveying the other pigs that trotted around the sty. Every so often, he would stretch out his neck and snuffle at Lander's mantle and shirt. "Put your

filthy snout in those," grumbled Lander under his breath, "and you'll be Black Sausage by dinnertime." He bent and scooped up more manure. At least he was almost finished, though gods only knew if Brin was finished with him.

The back door of the Eel opened and Tycho Arisaenn stepped out, a repulsively smug look on his face. He saw Lander and smiled. "New job, Lander? It suits you."

The sound of Tycho's voice brought a chorus of happy squeals from Brin's pigs. The ones already in the sty ran across to greet him. Lander turned around just in time to see more come tumbling out of the covered shelter, woken from their afternoon nap. Suddenly they were pouring across the sty in a fat wave of swine-flesh. Lander yelped and scrambled out of their way.

His wheelbarrow wasn't so lucky. The hindquarters of one scrambling pig banged into it, setting it swaying. A second impact knocked it over and dung went spilling across the ground. Lander ground his teeth together, too angry even to curse. Tycho broke off his fond greeting of the pigs that swarmed around him to look up and smile again. "Sorry," he apologized. There wasn't a trace of sincerity in his voice. "You know how they are around me."

Tycho had sung to the pigs once. Once. It had been eerie to watch them all standing around and listening to the bard like some audience at a fancy concert. Now they acted as if he were their best friend whenever he came around.

Fortunately, Lander wasn't the only one who found Tycho as annoying as an infestation of fleas. Black Scratch snorted and trumpeted loudly, trotting across the sty with his bristles up and his tail stiff. The other pigs scattered before their true king. Lander scowled at Tycho as he righted the wheelbarrow and grabbed the spade again. "I'd like to see you give that one a serenade some time," he snarled with a nod at the boar.

"Lander," said Brin, "just clean that mess up." The halfling leaped down from the table and came across to Tycho.

"You're late."

"I was held up. I ran into trouble with Mard Dantakain—not over the delivery!" he added hastily. He pulled a tin tube tied with green cord out of his coat. "I'm going to have to work out a new way to meet with Jacerryl, though." Brin just shrugged as he took the tube.

"That's your problem, Tycho. You move between dockside and hightown easily enough, but there are other people who can do the same. Just don't let me down; tell me I need to replace you before I find out from someone else." He turned and started back to the table. "You can collect at the bar as usual on the way out. Four gold. I don't like late deliveries."

Lander flashed a grin at Tycho as the bard's face twisted. Tycho caught the grin and scowled at him. "Keep shoveling, Lander," he hissed. Lander flicked a bit of manure at him. Tycho dodged it neatly and took a few steps farther into the sty. "Brin," he said, "I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"I don't do favors," Brin replied, tugging on the cord around the tube. "They cost too much." He turned around and looked up. "Ton asked me for a favor once. I think you knew him. Shame about him and Ardo, isn't it?"

Lander was pleased to see Tycho stiffen. The curly-haired man managed to keep his voice level, though. "It's not about coin. It will only take a bit of your time—a little storytelling, really."

"You're the storyteller here." Brin dropped the cord to the mucky floor of the sty and pulled out the cork that sealed the tube. "Why do you want me to tell you a story? " His fingers dipped into the tube and drew out a piece of silk.

"Not me," said Tycho as Brin flicked back the folds of silk. "There's—"

, The silence that fell between the halfling and the bard was solid like a wall. Both seemed frozen, staring down at the silk in Brin's hand. Lander dropped his spade and crossed the sty with two long steps to look as well.

Lying on the silk were half a dozen pieces of ordinary white gravel.

"Oh, bind me," Tycho whispered in horror. "Bind me, bind me, bind me..."

"Where are my beljurils?" howled Brin. All around him, pigs squealed and ran. Even Brin flinched away. Tycho turned pale and stumbled back. Brin lunged after him, flinging away the tin tube and jumping up to grab a fistful of Tycho's coat front. It should have been a ludicrous sight—the tiny halfling raging at a human who was almost twice his size. Somehow, though, it wasn't. Brin's weight dragged on Tycho, forcing him to bend almost double. Suddenly Black Scratch was there as well, snorting and scraping his hooves through the muck. Other pigs were closing in, too, following the boar's example and turning on their one-time friend. Lander stayed well back.

"They were there, Brin!" Tycho insisted. "They were there, I swear it!"

Brin's hand twisted the silk closed around the gravel and drove the bundle straight into Tycho's face. "Do those feel like beljurils to you?" he screamed. He hit Tycho again. "Do they?"

Tycho tried to reach forward and tear Brin away. The halfling just swung himself up off the ground and planted a foot hard in Tycho's gut, dropping down again as he staggered back, gagging and gasping for air. "Where are they?" Brin screamed.

"I don't know!" choked Tycho. He tried to scramble back to his feet, but Black Scratch was right there. Tycho sank into a crouch, eyes on a level with Brin's. "Bind me, Brin, I don't know. They were there. In the tube. I checked them with Jacerryl when he passed them to me. He can tell you that." His tongue licked out, smearing blood on his lips. "In the jail. Someone must have taken them while I was in jail."

"You were in jail?"

"I told you, there was trouble with Mard Dantakain!" Tycho

shouted back. He was trembling. "I've been in the middle town jail for most of the day! Brin, you know I wouldn't try to cheat you!"

"I have buyers waiting for those beljurils." Brin stalked forward. His hand snapped out and closed on Tycho's chin, pulling the bard forward so they were nose to nose amid the snorting pigs. "You lost them. You find them."

Tycho swallowed. "Brin—"

"Can you pay for them? " Brin searched Tycho's eyes. "I don't think so. I can't even sell you to slavers for the price of those gems. Find them. You've got until noon tomorrow." He leaned back and forced Tycho's head around until he was staring into Black Scratch's yellow gaze. The boar huffed and long strands of foamy saliva sprayed across Tycho's face. "If you don't have the gems back, I'll take up

Lander's suggestion and let you try a serenade on Black Scratch." Brin leaned in close again. "I should warn you that he doesn't have much of an ear for music."

He thrust Tycho away and the bard went sprawling back across the sty. For a moment, he just stared at Brin in panic then he twisted to his feet and scrambled for the door back into the Eel. "Through the alley!" Brin spat at him. "Through the alley!" It was too late—Tycho was already through the door and running through the Eel. Over the noise of the pigs, Lander caught the shouts and exclamations from inside as he fled.

"Bugger," grumbled Brin. He turned around and flung the bundle of gravel hard against the nearest wall. Pigs squealed and darted away from the splinters of rock that came spraying out of it. "Lander! Are you done yet?"

Lander jumped for his abandoned spade. "Almost, Brin!"

"Leave it. Get back out there and find me Kuang Li Chien. Alive or dead, he has to be somewhere. And while you're out, find Desmada and see what she knows about Tycho being in jail." Lander blinked at the command and dropped his spade again, reaching instead for his shirt, mantle, and

the curved saber. Brin rubbed Black Scratch behind the ears. "I don't like having this many loose ends floating around. They tend to get tangled up."

"Sir," said Giras the fence in an offended voice. "Are you trying to ruin me?" He flicked a finger at one of the gold coins Li had laid on the shop counter. "Such fine quality work as the items you request is not easily come by. And so exotic!"

"I told you," Li hissed between his teeth. "All of those things are mine!" He jabbed a finger around the shop. His boots. The sleeve of a shirt poking out from a pile. His hat resting on the head of some kind of stuffed bird. "They were stolen from me last night!"

Giras's eyes narrowed and his voice took on a harsher edge. "And I told you, sir, those items have been in my shop for months, sold to me by a trader from the Shou-towns of Thesk. If you're accusing me of dealing in stolen goods, I'll thank you to take your custom elsewhere." His fingers played across the gold. "Now, if you like, I could perhaps make you a special offer. The boots you so admired, a pair of pants and a shirt for—"

Li reached out, grabbed Giras by the back of his neck, and bashed his head down against the counter. As the fence staggered back, one of the gold coins stuck to his forehead, Li whirled on the muscle-bound guard standing by the shop door. The man was already lumbering forward, hand reaching for a stout club. Li ducked in close and struck him hard twice, once under the chin and once on the side of the neck. He dropped with a thud that shook the floor. Li turned back to Giras, seizing his collar and dragging him to his feet. "I think two gold is more than fair for stolen goods," he said gruffly. "Do you agree?"

Giras nodded eagerly. Li thrust him at the nearest stack of goods. "Dig out the things you bought from Lander last night. All of them."

He stripped off the clothes he had stolen that morning and put on his own as fast as Giras could produce them. Spare clothing and other goods piled up on the counter. Li sighed with relief as he pulled on his own boots, properly fitted and without holes, and looked up at Giras. The fence had stopped and was standing beside the counter, rubbing at the deep, red impression the coin had stamped on his forehead. Li looked at the pile of goods and frowned. "There should be a coat and a dao." Giras blinked at the word. "A sword," snarled Li. "A great, heavy, curved sword that could cut through your thieving neck in one stroke."

"I don't have it," Giras whimpered. "Lander wouldn't sell it to me. He kept it. The coat I sold this morning—to one of Lander's men." Li scowled and Giras cringed. "I didn't know you'd be coming in!"

Li growled and reached for the foul coat he had just discarded. Tycho would have to wait for the rubies. "I need a weapon then." Giras cringed again.

"A weapon? I can't help you. I don't carry them. Forbidden for me to even—" Li rose and stomped toward him. Giras swallowed hard. Darting over to a large trunk, he twisted on a handle. There was a click and both the lid and front of the trunk swung open with graceful majesty. An array of weapons glittered within. Li looked them over and chose a sword that was curved like his dao, though with a lighter, Western blade. Giras nodded. "Calishite scimitar. Excellent choice—"

"Be quiet." Li took the sheath that went with the scimitar, slid the blade into it, and gave Giras a final glare. "You should find another trade." He turned and stalked out of the shop.

He was so wrapped up in his anger that he barely even noticed the tottering old woman in the street until he had practically walked right over top of her. She gasped and he caught her arm, helping her steady herself. "Your pardon, honored mother," he apologized and started to turn away.

The woman grabbed his wrist and said sharply in a thin, liquid voice, "Kuang Li Chien!"

Li froze, startled, and looked down. The woman was looking at him intently, eyes of a faded blue focused on him. Her grip was frail and quivering. Her entire body shook slightly. He could have pulled away easily. There was something familiar about the woman, though. "You live with Tycho," he said. She had been asleep on a couch when he had slipped out that morning. Another memory came back to him—her face as she prodded his aching body. "You helped Tycho heal me."

"My name is Veseene. I'm Tycho's friend. He did the work of healing you, though." Her eyes hardened. "If I let you go, will you run again?" Li flushed.

"No. And I apologize for leaving this morning. I have seen Tycho and spoken with him. We have made our peace." He gave her a little bow. "I hope you can forgive me as well. It was rude, but I felt there was something I needed to do. I've explained it to Tycho. He's even agreed to help me."

Veseene's eyebrows rose like pale wings. "Did he?" She released his wrist. "Would you care to explain to me, too?"

Li hesitated. "It is a long story, Veseene. Do you speak Shou?" Veseene shook her head. "Perhaps Tycho could explain it to you later then?"

"Perhaps he could." She cocked her head, though the shaking of her body almost made it look like she was nodding. "I heard what went on Giras's shop."

"Tycho sent me here to buy back what Lander took from me."

"It sounded like a very violent purchase." "Giras forced me to haggle."

A smile creased Veseene's face. "Lander won't be happy about that." Li smiled back.

"Lander," he said, his grip tightening on the scimitar, "is welcome to discuss the matter with me at any time." He nodded toward the water and the dockside district. "I'm supposed to meet Tycho at the Wench's Ease now. Would

you like to come with me?"

She shook her head. "I'm on an errand," she said. "Why don't you come with me?" Her arm slipped through his.

The gesture was very easy, very natural, but Li could sense a steel-like will and purpose behind it. "Do I have a choice?"

, "No, not really." Veseene began to stroll along the street, pulling Li along more by force of personality than physical strength. Her steps were short and careful over the slippery slush that remained from the night's snowfall. Li frowned and shifted his arm so that he gave her more support. She nodded gratefully. "Thank you. I'm not quite as graceful as I used to be, I'm afraid."

"The young peach tree is beautiful and tender," said Li, "but it bears little fruit."

Veseene smiled again. "You have a certain charm to you, Kuang Li Chien."

"Just call me 'Li,'" he told her. "I regret that it is a borrowed charm—that verse was written by the poet Kar Wuan many centuries ago. I studied it as part of my training for the imperial bureaucracy."

"Knowledge is its own grace," said Veseene. "How do you like that? I made it up just now."

"Truly immortal wisdom."

They walked almost half a block in silence. Every few paces, Li stole a look at Veseene. She was still tall for her advanced age and only a little bit stooped. The tremors that shook her body and rendered her voice strange and wet were really the only sign of the infirmity of years.

Veseene didn't return his glances or even look at him at all, but just kept her eyes on the ground, alert for treacherous footing. When she spoke again, she said, "Tell me the short version of your story, Li."

He hesitated for a moment and told her the essence of his tale. "Pirates on the Sea of Fallen Stars attacked and killed a trading party from my home city a year and a half ago. My brother was spared but taken prisoner. We have heard

nothing of him since then. I came west to find him."

"And Brin?"

"Brin was mate of that pirate ship. He is the last survivor of it and may be the only one who knows what happened to my brother. Tycho has agreed to make inquiries and try to arrange a chance for me to talk with Brin."

"Ah," said Veseene. "And you've heard nothing at all from the pirates? No ransom demands?" Li shook his head. "Ah," she said again and they walked a little farther before she added, "Tycho is clever, but he's also a hothead. He doesn't always think things all the way through."

Li stiffened. He glanced at Veseene, but she was still watching the ground as she walked. "Pirates," she continued, "generally don't take prisoners for sport. They take them for ransom. And why take only one prisoner when they could have ransomed the entire trading party?" She looked up finally and met his eyes. "And why," she said bluntly, "do you need a sword if you just want to talk to someone?" Li pressed his lips together. Veseene's eyes narrowed. "You're not telling me—or Tycho—the whole story." "No," Li admitted tightly. "I'm not. And I can't. But what I'm not saying doesn't concern you. I owe Tycho my life. I won't put him in danger."

"I hope not. Because if Tycho comes to harm, I'll come after you." She stopped. "Every peach has a stone, Li. I may be old, but I'm tough. I drink wasp venom for fun."

"I understand, honored mother," Li said politely. Veseene raised an eyebrow.

"You don't believe me." She pointed above her head. Li glanced up. There was a sign there, words he couldn't understand written out in western script. He recognized the picture that went with them though. A bundle of herbs beside a mortar and pestle. An herbalist's shop. "Come inside with me," said Veseene.

She drew him through a door and up a flight of narrow stairs. The shop was at the top of them, a dim, fragrant space with

crook-lined walls and dry, leafy bundles hanging from the rafters. A slender, dusk-skinned woman with long black hair and eyes rimmed with dark paint looked up from a worktable, first at Veseene and, with a lingering glance, at Li. Veseene greeted her. "Olore, Sephera. I'm here for my tea."

The woman nodded and rose. She went around the room, selecting crocks and jars from the wall. When she had a collection of half a dozen, she returned to her table and began mixing the contents of each together in a mortar. "Sephera," said Veseene, "my friend here was wondering what went into my tea."

"Things to energize muscles made weak and quicken nerves made dull," said Sephera. Her voice was soft, with a resonant, chanting quality. "Laspar needles and pepper, blackroot and winterberry seeds." She took two spoonfuls of rust-colored flakes from a small jar. "Redflower leaves." The last jar was tightly sealed with waxed cloth and Sephera held it at arm's length as she opened it. She reached inside with thin wooden tongs and removed a pale amber lump, holding it up for Li to see. It was only about the size of the tip of his smallest finger. "The crystallized venom of a giant wasp," said Sephera. She added it to the mortar, resealed the jar, took up a pestle, and gently began to crush the assembled ingredients.

Li looked at Veseene. The old woman shrugged. "All right," she said, "maybe I don't drink it for fun." She gave Li a harsh look. "You understand though?"

He bent at the waist, bowing to her. "You've made your point."

"Tycho is family to me, Li. I'll do anything to protect him."

"Believe me, Veseene," said Li, "I understand the importance of protecting family." Veseene looked at him curiously, her head tilted again. Li didn't return her gaze. "Do you want to come with me to meet Tycho?"

She shook her head. "I'll have a cup of tea with Sephera

then go home. Tell Tycho we talked, though." She nodded toward the stairs. "Go back to the last intersection and follow that street toward dockside. It will take you right to the Wench's Ease."

Li bowed again. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't get Tycho in more trouble than he gets himself," Veseene replied. "That will be thanks enough."

er 6

he sun was low in the west. The last of the day was kissing the rooftops of Spandeliyon and the underbellies of thick clouds moving in low from the east. There would be more snow overnight. Thick, wet snow. Tycho knew it with the instincts of someone raised beside the sea. The temperature of the air was hardly dropping at all. It might even have been getting a little bit warmer, but he couldn't really be certain of that. He simply felt cold all over.

His boots sent slush and muck splattering up with every long, running stride. As he rounded a corner, the slick surface of the street betrayed him and sent him skidding in a wide arc, arms flailing as he fought to keep his balance. A few people stared at him. Tycho barely noticed. One thought kept flowing through his mind.

Bind me, bind me, bind me, bind me...

He kept running. He couldn't get the vision of Black Scratch's mad yellow eyes out of his head.

The sight of the Wench's Ease was a blessing. Tycho slid to a stop, clutching at the great, bare tree in the yard outside the tavern for support. He shrugged out of the strap that held his strilling, stripped off his coat, and began scrubbing with handfuls of coarse, icy snow at the patches of dung that smeared it. He had lost one of his mittens somewhere. He shook the other one off his hand and flung it away. "Bind me, bind me, bind me!"

"Tycho?" A shadow fell over him. Tycho flinched and looked up.

It was Li. The Shou was dressed—mostly—in his own clothes

again. "Just getting here?" Tycho asked. His voice sounded brittle even to him. "I thought you'd already be inside."

"I ran into your friend Veseene. We talked." Li's face was drawn in concern. "Tycho, what's wrong?" His nose crinkled. "Pearl of night, that stinks!"

"I slipped."

"Did you find out anything about Brin or Yu Mao?" asked Li cautiously.

"I asked around," Tycho lied. "Put it out that you were just—" The words caught in his throat. Noon tomorrow. He couldn't lie to Li. He'd promised to help and now... He flung the last handful of snow away and rubbed his face. "No," he confessed, "I didn't find out anything. I didn't even get the chance to. Bind and tar me, Li, I'm deep in the bilge."

Li's eyes widened slightly and he drew a breath. "Because of me?"

Tycho shook his head and pulled his coat back on. It was wet and cold from the snow, but most of the pig stench was gone. "No, it's all my fault. When we were arrested, I had a package with me that I was supposed to deliver to—" He hesitated. Considering the way the Shou had reacted to Desmada's corruption, Tycho didn't think he'd want to hear that his new friend did jobs for the one-eyed halfling as well. Or that he'd known all along where to find him. "That I was supposed to deliver," he said and left it at that. "While we were in jail, someone stole what was in the package. I've been given until noon tomorrow to get it ... them back."

"What was in the package?" Li asked. Tycho told him. Li's eyes went wider. "Who in Spandeliyon could want something that valuable?"

"The man I was supposed to deliver them to!" Tycho wrapped his arms around himself. "Bitch Queen's mercy! What am I supposed to do? Li, this man is insane. I'm amazed he didn't break my legs before sending me out to look. If I can't find the beljurils, I'm dead. I'm worse than dead." He shuddered.

"This man sounds as bad as Brin," said Li.

Tycho couldn't hold back the strangled choke that rose up out of his throat. Li looked at him sharply. For a moment he was silent. "Tycho," he said finally, "that was pig dung on your coat."

"There are a lot of pigs in Spandeliyon," Tycho said defensively. "Every third house keeps a few."

"I haven't seen a pig since I've been here."

"It's cold! They like to stay in shelters where it's warm."

"Then you must have been standing around in a pigsty when you slipped."

He met Tycho's eyes. The bard ground his teeth together and stared back. Li's gaze was steady. Unflinchingly steady—and ever so slightly disappointed. A shiver

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crawled down Tycho's back and settled in his gut. Li's eyes tensed, not quite narrowing with suspicion, but just flickering as if a bit of trust had slipped away. Tycho's gut clenched and rose in anger, most of it directed squarely at himself. "All right," he groaned, "it was Brin! I deliver packages to him. Mard Dantakain's brother Jacerryl uses his influence to bring things into Spandeliyon—I pick them up when I give Laera her music lessons and take them dockside to Brin." He leaned against the tree and banged his head on its rough bark. "I told you a lot of people in Spandeliyon work for Brin. I'm one of them." "Veseene—"

Tycho looked up. "Veseene doesn't know. This is how I make the extra coin to pay for the tea that keeps her palsy in check. Without it, she'd be bedridden."

There was a look of struggle on Li's face. Tycho sighed. "Li, I'm sorry. I should have told you. I've always known where you could find Brin. He really is dangerous, though. I wouldn't wish his bad side on anybody." He made a sour expression. "Of course, now I'm on it. You probably don't want to talk to him right now, but if you want to look for him later, you'll find him at a festhall called the Eel."

Li did a double take and made a sour expression as well. "Last night when I asked directions to a tavern, I was told I could look for the Wench's Ease or the Eel. If I had chosen the Eel, none of this would have happened?"

"Well, no." Tycho screwed up his face. "But there's a pretty good chance you'd be dead."

"Then I'm glad I chose the Wench's Ease." He held out his hand. Tycho just stared at it. "You were willing to help me, Tycho. I'll help you."

Tycho gaped at him. "You're kidding. I thought you'd be mad when I told you I worked for Brin."

Li shrugged. "Veseene gave me instructions that I wasn't supposed to get you in trouble. You were arrested because of me, so I am in a way responsible for the loss of the beljurils. You had your reasons for not telling me everything, Tycho."

Tycho gave him a narrow glance. Li coughed. "And Veseene is very intimidating."

Tycho's lips twitched into a smile. "You're more afraid of Veseene than you are of Brin?"

"I haven't met Brin yet." Li's mouth narrowed. "Though I keep trying." He reached out and grabbed Tycho's hand, pulling him away from the tree and upright. "First we find your beljurils; then we talk to Brin."

"We don't have any clue of who took the beljurils at the jail, though!"

Li looked at him. "But we do. Who did we see there?" Tycho shrugged. Li snorted. "There is a saying in Shou Lung: A snake is never less than a snake."

Tycho frowned, puzzling through the proverb. "Once a thief, always a thief?" He sucked in a breath. "Desmada! We know she's corrupt already—what's to stop her from stealing from a prisoner's belongings?"

"That was my thought," agreed Li. "But would even she be brave enough to steal gems meant for Brin?"

"She wouldn't have known they were going to him." He smiled grimly. "This time of day, she'll be out on patrol. Let's

go look for her and see if she's in the mood for a talk."

"There!" Tycho pulled Li around a corner and into a narrow street. "Desmada!" he called.

Up ahead, the guard twisted around and peered through the twilight then relaxed—slightly—with recognition. "What is it, Tycho?" Her hand dropped to the hilt of her sword. Recognition didn't mean trust—it could just as well mean she had guessed why they had come looking for her. Tycho quickly spread his hands.

"Easy," he said with a casual smile. "We just wanted a word with you."

Her eyes narrowed. She glanced at Li and back to Tycho. "You pulled off a slick argument this morning. You know Mard isn't going to forget that."

Tycho shrugged. "I make enemies every now and then."

"Mard isn't a good man to have as an enemy. If he brings you in again, he'll make sure you aren't able to talk your way free past a magistrate—he knows the law and he'll take advantage of it."

"Better that than knowing the law and abusing it," muttered Li. He was glaring hard at Desmada. Tycho poked an elbow into his gut, but Desmada's attention was already back on him.

"You know," she said, "I've been trying to figure out why you look familiar. It was nagging me all through the hearing, too."

"Imagine me being held down in the snow—"

Tycho jammed his elbow back again, this time hard. Li's words ended in a thick gasp. They had talked about this as they searched for Desmada. Li favored a rather direct, physical form of questioning; Tycho something more subtle. He thought that they'd had it worked out which they were going to try first. Desmada stared at them suspiciously, but Tycho just turned a broad smile on her.

"Speaking of the hearing," he said, "I was wondering if you could help us out with something." Desmada snorted.

Tycho gritted his teeth behind his smile. "Something was missing from my things when I retrieved them after the hearing."

Desmada grunted and shrugged her shoulders. "Ask at the guard station," she said and started to turn away.

Tycho moved with her, crunching through the snow. "We're not really likely to be welcomed with open arms at the guard station right now."

"Not my fault."

Just over her shoulder, Li made an angry face and flexed his fingers. Desmada must have sensed something because she spun around sharply, her hand shifting to a better grip on her sword. "What are you trying to—?" She drew a quick breath. "You think I stole something from you?"

She took two fast steps to the side so she faced them both. Tycho glanced quickly up and down the street. They were—for the moment—alone, most other citizens of Spandeliyon having already sensibly retired to their homes or favorite taverns for the evening. There were still people abroad though and he had no desire to be caught threatening a member of the guard, even one as corrupt as Desmada.

"Look," he said to her quickly, "we're just trying to find out what happened to some gems. If you could help us out—"

"I don't know anything about any gems."

"They belong to Brin," Li growled. Tycho winced and shot the Shou a foul glance. Desmada just snorted again, this time with laughter.

"You lost gems that belong to Brin? No wonder you're desperate." She eyed them both carefully. "You walk away now and I won't pass that little bit of news on around dock-side. Fair?"

"Desmada—"

The guard drew out a few inches of her sword. "Walk away, Tycho," she said harshly. "I don't know anything about your gems."

Tycho sighed and shrugged. "You know, I'd like to believe

you, Desmada, but you should just cooperate and answer all my questions truthfully".

He let the command roll out of him in a baritone wave of almost-song, the music carrying the magic of a subtle spell. Desmada's face went slack for a moment as the enchantment sank into her mind. Li glanced at Tycho with an impressed expression. "Will it work?"

Desmada glanced between them. "Will what work?" she demanded.

"Never mind." Tycho flicked his fingers at Li, waving him to silence. The magic was potent but also delicate. Desmada would obey his suggestion, but the magic wouldn't stop her from attacking them or simply walking away. He kept on smiling at her. "Please, let me ask you again, Desmada: What do you know about the beljurils that were stolen from me at the guard station?"

The same slack expression of a moment before rippled across Desmada's face. "Nothing," she said.

Tycho blinked and glanced at Li. The Shou seemed startled, too. "Nothing?" Tycho asked. "You really know nothing about the stolen gems?"

"That's what I told you, isn't it?"

"Do you know of any other guard who would have tampered with my things while I was locked up?"

"No," Desmada snapped irritably. Tycho sucked on his teeth. It had to be the truth—his spell compelled her. At least, it compelled her to answer with what she thought was the truth.

"Did you see ray things at all?" he asked. "Did you see a tin tube tied with green cord?"

"Yeah, I saw them. And I saw the tube." She shrugged. "I saw it before I saw you, actually. I didn't even know you'd been arrested until Jacerryl told me."

Tycho stiffened. "Jacerryl? Jacerryl Dantakain?" Desmada nodded. "When did you see him?"

"When he brought your things to the guard station. He said

Mard had rushed on ahead with you two under arrest and left him to bring your belongings along afterward."

Jacerryl.

' Tycho took a deep breath as everything came together in his mind. Unlike Desmada, Jacerryl had known there were beljurils inside the tube. And he'd already passed the tube off, so if the beljurils went missing, it wouldn't be his fault. All the gems had been accounted for when the tube left his possession. He even had the perfect cover in the form of his brother's law-abiding honesty! Tycho could almost hear Jacerryl's voice whispering in his hood-covered ear again: Mard sticks to the law like honey. They'll be safe. Why had he been so close? A second breath turned into a hiss. It had probably been Jacerryl's hands that had taken the tube in the first place!

The perfect opportunity—all Jacerryl had needed to do was act quickly.

Tycho squeezed his eyes shut. The white gravel that Brin had shaken out of the tin tube. He'd seen that, too. It filled the pots of evergreen branches in Mard Dantakain's entrance hall, the pots he'd stood beside while Jacerryl gave him the beljurils. He cracked his eyes open again. Desmada was staring at him. "Get out of here," he spat at her. "We're finished."

"Lunatic. Good luck with Brin—you're going to need it." Desmada slammed her sword back into its sheath and grinned viciously. "Think maybe I'll start up a pool. How long will Tycho last after Brin gets hold of him?"

She turned and swaggered away. Li turned red and reached out to grab her shoulder, but Tycho stopped him. "She'll tell people that you're in trouble!" the Shou protested.

"Gossip is probably already flying," Tycho spat. "The magic will fog her mind, though. In a few minutes, Desmada will only barely remember talking to us." He curled his hands into fists and smacked them into his forehead. "Bind me! It was Jacerryl!"

Li looked at him, puzzled. Tycho shook his head. "I'll explain on the way. Come on—we're going back to hightown." He stomped off along the street, forcing Li to scramble to catch up to him.

It was like the goddess of fortune had stepped down from on high and kissed him.

Lander stepped out of his hiding place at the top of the street and watched the pair vanish into the gloom. Unbelievable! After a long while tracking Desmada down, he had been just about to hail her when a call from the other end of the street had drawn her attention. Tycho's voice, but it was the sight of the tall man with him that had made Lander's jaw drop. He had ducked into a doorway and watched as Tycho and Li Chien—alive after all—spoke with Desmada. The bard and the Shou were working together!

He couldn't be sure what they had said—he was too far away to catch anything other than the occasional word

when voices rose—but Tycho was after Brin's beljurils, that much was clear. What Kuang Li Chien was doing with him. ... He cursed under his breath. The alley off Gold Lane where he had left the Shou lay between the Wench's Ease and the building on Bakers Way where Tycho lived with his doddering old teacher! Tycho must have found Li Chien last night and rescued him.

What now? Lander bit his lip. They were going somewhere—should he follow them? His hand dropped to the handle of the stolen saber, but he hesitated. Two of them, one of him, and Li Chien fought like a demon. The Shou had managed to get some of his clothes back—Tycho must have guided him to Giras. He had a weapon, too. Lander let go of the saber. It would be safer to catch up with Desmada and ask her what had happened. Safer, but probably unnecessary. He could talk to her any time.

Li Chien was the one he wanted. Searching Spandeliyon for him without any clues to his whereabouts had been like gambling at a crooked table. But knowing he was with

Tycho... that changed the game. Lander knew Tycho. He knew the places the bard frequented and where he slept at night. Lander cracked his knuckles and turned back toward the Eel. Brin was finally going to get some good news today.

There was a knocking on the other side of the door. "Natala?" called Jacerryl sweetly. "Folco tells me you've come to see me." The latch jiggled and rose and the door opened a narrow crack. Light speared the darkness. Jacerryl's head followed, turning from side to side as he looked around. "No lights? What are you up to, my saucy little minx? " He stepped inside and closed the door behind himself. "A little game of wolf and rabbit? Or is it blind man's bluff?" Footsteps and the rustle of clothing being shed. "Give me a hint, darling—hot or cold?"

"Oh, very cold." Tycho unclenched his fist and let the light of a glowing coin shine out. Jacerryl, doublet off and caught in the act of pulling open his shirt, froze. His mouth dropped open. He stumbled back. Li stepped out from where he had hidden behind the door and gave him a firm push forward. Tycho, perched on the foot of the man's bedstead, smiled down at him. "Olore, Jacerryl. Expecting someone else?"

"You!" Jacerryl stood straight, trying to act firm and dignified as he hastily began to rebutton his shirt. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

He shot a glance toward the door. Tycho gestured and Li moved to stand between him and it. "You're not the only one I know in this house, Jacerryl. One of your servants—and I'm not saying which one, so don't ask—owed me a favor." He tossed the glowing coin to Li and shifted his strilling around on its strap, positioning the instrument against his arm. "We need to have a little chat about Brin's beljurils."

"Why? They were just fine when I gave them to you, weren't they?"

The response was a little too fast, a little practiced. "Did I say there was something wrong with them?" Tycho set his bow

against the strings of the strilling and began to play a soft, droning melody. "What would make you think that there was?"

"N-nothing," Jacerryl stammered. He swallowed and seemed to summon up a bit of courage. "Neither of you are particularly welcome around here," he said. "All I have to do is yell, and Mard will be in here with a squad of guards instantly."

Tycho kept playing. "Mard isn't home right now. And there is exactly one guard in the house."

"The servants will come! You might have conned one of them into letting you in—"

"—and getting you up here," Tycho reminded him.

"—and tricking me," Jacerryl agreed between gritted teeth, "but one treacherous servant won't be able to help you when you're found assaulting me in my own chambers. You've already been arrested in this house once today!"

"Stop posturing, Jacerryl." Tycho gathered his concentration, focusing on the music. "Tell me what you did with the beljurils!"

It was the same spell he had worked on Desmada, backed up this time with the music of the strilling as well as the song of his voice. He focused his will as the magic washed through him, bending the enchantment toward Jacerryl.

The other man just tensed, his face screwed up. "I won't tell you anything!"

The carefully woven magic faltered, frayed, and fell apart. Tycho struck a discordant note on his strilling in surprise. Jacerryl cracked open one eye then the other. "Ha! Was that the best you could do? I passed the beljurils on to you and that's all! Now get—"

With a muted growl, Li reached out, spun him around, and hit him hard with a backhanded blow. Jacerryl swayed once and slipped to the ground.

Tycho stared at him then glowered at Li. "I know we had a plan worked out this time!" he said in Shou. Li shrugged.

"He resisted your magic. Were you just going to keep playing until he gave up?" He grunted. "Besides, he was annoying me."

Tycho sighed. "I guess I should be glad you didn't kill him, then. You've got a temper on you, you know." Li snorted.

"/have a temper?"

"I am the essence of calm!" Tycho slid his strilling around to his back, hopped down off the bed, and nodded to a high, well-stuffed chair. "Help me get him up in that."

Jacerryl moaned and stirred as they heaved him up off the floor and deposited him in the chair. His eyes opened and focused on them. Abruptly he stiffened, sucking in a lungful of air. His mouth opened wide, but Li's hand shot out fast and wrapped around his neck, pinning him to the back of the chair. Jacerryl's shout emerged as a strained gurgle. Li glanced at Tycho. "Maybe we need to try a more physical form of persuasion?" he suggested in Shou.

Tycho threw up his hands. "Fine. I give up." He leaned forward and met Jacerryl's gaze. "Jacerryl," he said bluntly in Common, "my friend here thinks we should just twist off your head right now."

Li gave him a look of disgust, but their captive's eyes went wide. He flailed out suddenly, arms and legs lashing at Li. The Shou batted them away and poked him sharply in the abdomen. Jacerryl let out a pained squeak. He stopped struggling. Tycho squatted down to face him. "Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I think I can persuade him to just dislocate your shoulders instead. I might even be able to get him to let you go if you come clean with me on the beljurils. You took them out of the tube and replaced them with gravel after I was arrested. Then you took the tube down to the guard station with my other belongings. Am I right?"

Jacerryl's eyes rolled. Tycho tapped Li's arm and Li eased the pressure on Jacerryl's throat, letting him draw a shallow breath. "Well?" asked Tycho.

"Yes," Jacerryl gasped.

"Wonderful." Tycho stood up. "Why don't you just tell me where they are and we'll be on our way."

Jacerryl closed his eyes. "I don't have them anymore," he gulped. "I sold them already." Tycho hissed.

"Who did you sell them to?"

"The Hooded."

Tycho yelped sharply and grabbed his head. "No," he groaned. "You didn't." Jacerryl nodded. Tycho slid his hands down his face and looked at Jacerryl over his fingertips. "You idiot." He stepped forward and stomped down hard on Jacerryl's foot. Jacerryl yelped, too, and cringed. "You idiot!"

Li's other arm came up quickly and pushed him back, holding him at arm's length from Jacerryl. "Tycho! Stop that!" Li snapped. "Who's the Hooded?"

"One of Brin's rivals, another gang boss of dockside. He's bad. Not as outright nasty as Brin, but still not someone you want to sit down to dinner with." Tycho ran his fingers through his hair and paced around the room. "He's smart, though. He hasn't been in Spandeliyon much longer than Brin, a season at most, but he's coming up strong. Where Brin seized control through sheer ruthlessness, the Hooded is building himself up slowly. Slow and strong, very patient. And mysterious—no one knows who he is."

Li frowned. "Why not?"

"He always wears a hood," rasped Jacerryl. Tycho and Li looked back to him, Li almost as if he'd forgotten who was on the other end of his arm. "It's why they call him the Hooded. He wears bulky robes, so the most you can tell about him is that he's a big man. And he only speaks in a murmur and never directly to you, only through an interpreter." He smiled slightly. "Could I breathe a little bit more now, please?"

"No." Tycho sat down on Jacerryl's bed. Brin and the Hooded. He hadn't thought this could get any worse! "Bind me, Li! I don't want to go up against two gang bosses!" He glanced up. Li had a distant expression on his face, his mouth narrow

in thought. Tycho's heart jumped. "You have an idea. Tell me you have an idea."

Li blinked and shook his head. "Why should the Hooded hide his identity?" Tycho groaned again.

"That's not an idea, Li. He probably has a perfectly respectable identity established somewhere else in the community—they say the Lords of Waterdeep wear masks when they're ruling and move among the people unsuspected when they aren't. If you're thinking that we could find out who he really is and force him to cough up the beljurils, don't bother. No one has figured out his identity in two years. We're not likely to do it overnight." He pushed himself up off the bed. "I think the best we can do is to go back to Brin, tell him that the Hooded has his gems now and that this weasel—" He jerked his head at Jacerryl. "—was the one who betrayed him, not me. That might satisfy him."

"Brin?" Jacerryl shrank back. "Brin knows?"

"No, I snuck back into Mard Dantakain's house for the fun of it. Yes, Brin knows!" He crossed his arms and stared down at Jacerryl. "I just hope he'll take you instead of me since this was all your—"

Sudden footsteps in the corridor and an insistent knocking on the bedchamber door interrupted him. "Master Jacerryl! Master Jacerryl!"

A servant—and not the perfidious chambermaid who had let them in! Tycho flinched. "What is it?" he demanded hastily, trying to imitate Jacerryl's voice. He leaped back to the bed and began bouncing on it vigorously. "Didn't Folco tell you I was busy?" He almost had to shout over the creaking wood.

The servant didn't go away. "I'm very sorry to bother you, sir, but it's Mistress Laera. She's not in her rooms."

"Maybe she's stepped out for the evening!"

"Sir?"

As he opened his mouth, searching desperately for something to say that would get rid of the servant, Jacerryl moved. Both legs hammered out at Li. The Shou twisted, but

one of Jacerryl's boots connected anyway, a solid kick to the groin. Li choked and staggered back, doubled over. Jacerryl was screaming the instant Li's hand left his throat. "Get help, you moron! I'm being attacked! Get help!"

He thrust himself up out of the chair. Tycho bounced up, jumping between him and the door. Jacerryl just turned the other way and darted for a second door. Li grabbed for him, but he dodged Li's outstretched hand. Growling, Li leaped closer—a heartbeat too late. Jacerryl, still howling for help, slammed the door in his face. Behind Tycho, the door to the corridor burst open and the servant rushed into the room. Tycho spun around, flung up a hand and sang a rough burst of song at him.

The magic caught the servant, sending him falling back in a daze. The damage had been done, though. Tycho could hear other voices out in the hall, raising the alarm. "Li!" he shouted.

The Shou wasn't listening. Shoulder leading, he hurled himself at the door through which Jacerryl had fled. Wood splintered and Li stormed through. Tycho shot a glance at the open door to the hallway, cursed, and went after him.

The chamber next door was some kind of sitting room with hunting trophies, art, and polished weapons displayed on the walls. Coals smoldered in the fireplace, shedding a thick, red light into the room. There was another door, presumably leading back out to the hallway. Li had Jacerryl down on the floor halfway to it. Jacerryl's screams had turned into broken whimpering as Li bashed his face against the rich carpet that covered the floor. "Enough, Li!" ordered Tycho. They weren't going to get any more out of Jacerryl. "We have to get out!" Li snarled and slapped Jacerryl across the back of his head one last time and jumped to his feet.

There was a window. Tycho grabbed a chair and swung it. Little panes of glass shattered. Lead bent. He swung the chair again and the window burst out entirely, letting night air swirl into the room. Tycho let the chair drop and leaned

out through the wreckage. The lower roof of the library where he had given Laera her lessons sloped about six feet below; the ground was an easy drop from its lower edge. He swung his legs over the sill, ready to jump. "Follow me, Li!"

No response. He glanced over his shoulder.

The Shou was frozen, staring at something on the wall.

"Li!"

"Li!" Tycho's shout came from a distance.

Mounted on the wall of Jacerryl's sitting room, a pair of swords shone dully in the dim light. Their blades were short, only about as long as his hand and forearm, but

wide. They had been sharpened only on one side, the edge curving up at the end to meet the back of the blade. Heavy guards also curved around leather-wrapped grips and extended up beside the back of the blade, a trap to catch and hold an opponent's weapon.

Delicately etched at the base of each blade was a single Shou character.

Li reached up and wrenched the swords off the wall. He whirled to stare at a cringing Jacerryl. "Where did you get these?"

"I bought them!" , "Where?"

"From the Hooded! He trades exotic weapons!"

"Li!" yelled Tycho. He was halfway out of a shattered window.

"Come on!"

Servants were pouring into the recently vacated bed chamber. The door from the sitting room to the hall opened as well. More servants stood framed in the doorway. Tycho pushed off from the sill, dropping out of sight. Li slapped both swords into one hand and leaped for the window, shoving himself through and jumping down to the roof below. Slate tiles cracked and slid under his feet; he staggered and barely managed to stop himself from sliding as well. Tycho was crouched at the edge of the roof. He gestured for him to follow then turned and slithered

backward over the edge, letting himself down slowly before dropping. Li scuttled carefully after him and peered over. Tycho stood in the snow below. "Hurry!"

"Catch these!" Li reached out and dropped the swords. Tycho gasped and flinched back then dodged forward again. Li didn't wait to see if he had the swords, but just slid down backward as Tycho had done. He caught a brief glimpse of servants peering out through

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the broken window above before he let go and dropped, rolling as he hit snow. Tycho grabbed his arm as he came to his feet and dragged him off into the shadows at a run.

They didn't stop until they were back in Spandeliyon's middle town and Tycho collapsed against a wall. "Here," he wheezed, "take your stupid knives. I hope they're worth almost getting caught!" He thrust the blades at him and bent over with his hands on his knees, sucking in deep breaths of air.

"They're not knives. They're swords. Butterfly swords. Shou weapons." Li wrapped his hands around the grips. He raised first the right then the left. "This one is Silkworm. This one is Mulberry Leaf."

Tycho looked up at him. "They have names?"

"These do." Li lowered the weapons and stared at them.

"They were Yu Mao's!"

CHAPTER 7

At a nod from Brin, Lander knocked on the rough wood of the door. There was no response. He knocked again then tried the handle. The door pushed open less than a hair's width before jamming. "Bolted," he grunted at Brin.

The halfling shrugged. "Veseene!" he yelled. "Veseene, let us in or you'll need a new door!"

For a moment there was silence, but then Lander heard a soft shuffling from the other side of the door. It was followed, however, not by the door opening, but only by the sharp grate of an iron bolt being drawn. The shuffling returned, moving away from the door this time. Lander tried the door again. This time it swung open easily.

Veseene was doddering across the floor to a worn, blanket-covered couch. "I'm not going to give you an invitation if that's what you're waiting for," she said without turning around. She lowered

herself onto the couch slowly. "What do you want from me, Brin?"

"Want? I'm just paying a call." Brin strutted through the doorway. Lander followed a little more cautiously. There were stories about Veseene. He had heard them when she had come to Spandeliyon for the first time, almost ten years ago—no archmage, but still a potent spellcaster who could wrap chains around a man's heart and mind with her songs and split the air itself with her shouts. Veseene the Lark. Over time, he had begun to wonder if the tales were nothing more than that, stories perhaps even spread by the bard herself. Certainly the greatest bit of magic he had seen her perform back then was prying Tycho away from the Spandeliyon dockside! And since the two of them had been back... well, there were new stories. Stories that said Veseene's powers had deserted her, stolen away by a wizened body that had betrayed her.

All the old woman had to do, however, was fix him with those faded blue eyes and suddenly he was a nothing but a

youth with a cheap sword and scraggly whiskers again. "Close the door behind yourself, Lander," she said.

Kander swung it shut without even thinking, shooting closed the heavy bolt that was probably the sturdiest thing in the place. He looked around Tycho and Veseene's rooms. He had the distinct impression that if Brin hadn't forcefully prevented Black Scratch from following them up the stairs, the boar's weight would have collapsed the entire building. Veseene's couch looked hardly sturdy enough to support her birdlike frame. A cupboard against one wall seemed ready to fall apart; a rough chunk of wood supported one corner of it in place of a proper leg.

The fireplace was tiny, the walls crisscrossed with fine cracks, the shutters on the window as frail as Veseene herself. Light in the room came in wisps from the fireplace and from greasy yellow tallow candles. The legendary Lark and her smart-mouthed apprentice, Lander realized sharply, lived like desperate shadows, no better than any of Spandeliyon's docksiders and worse than some. Would anyone with power live like that?

A sneer pulled on Lander's lips as fear and awe fell away before disdain. He crossed the room in three strides and threw open an interior door. The room beyond was cold, dark, and smelled vaguely of mold. All it contained was a chest, a sagging bed, and some stacked firewood. "They're not here, Brin."

Veseene's breath caught. Brin rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Lander. I wouldn't have guessed." There was a short stool close to the flickering fire. Brin sat himself on it and looked at Veseene intently. "You have a dagger hidden in your cushions," he said. "But your first instinct is right— you wouldn't have a chance of sticking me with it."

Veseene didn't move, didn't even blink.

"Lander," said Brin over his shoulder, "it's freezing cold in here. Stoke up the fire nice and hot. Give us some comfort."

Lander nodded and reached into the other room, scooping

up sticks and split logs. Half the stored wood was barely an armful. He piled it on the fire, poking at the glowing coals to stir them up. As the flames began to mount, Veseene finally flinched. "That's enough," she said. "You'll use up our supply."

"A little more, Lander. My nose is still cold." Brin rubbed his fingers together and grinned at Veseene. "We'll have it nice and warm for you shortly. Old bones shouldn't be cold, you know!"

"I'm warm enough." Lander felt Veseene's eyes follow him as he stacked on more wood. The fire was pouring out heat now—an absolute waste. He stood to go back to the other room for more wood. Panic flickered in Veseene's eyes. "That's enough, Lander!"

Her voice cracked and bubbled on his name. Her hands—and arms and legs—were trembling. She reached down and tried to tug a blanket over herself. Brin's small hand snapped forward and ripped it away from her. Veseene gasped, her shaking limbs jerking together like the tentacles of a squid poked with a stick. Brin glared at her. "I want Tycho and the Shou man, Kuang Li Chien," he snarled. "Where are they?"

Veseene was silent for a moment then she asked stubbornly, "Why?"

"Why? Why?" Brin jumped up on top of the stool and whirled the blanket around himself. "You shouldn't be asking, Veseene! You should be answering!" He hunched his body up and hobbled in a little circle. "Can't sing anymore, can you? Can't play, can't cast a spell. The lark's in a cage, but for some reason she still thinks she's flying free."

There was a tea box sitting on top of a low table. Brin unfurled the blanket from his body and snapped it sharply, like a whip. The end of it cracked against the tea box and sent it flying off the table. It smashed into the fireplace. Sparks flew. The dry wood charred and burst into flame almost instantly. A sweet-sharp smell drifted out into the

room. Brin turned back to Veseene.

"Where are they? " His voice was tight and grating, like steel on a whetstone.

"I don't know!" The trembling in Veseene's limbs was severe now. Her fingers were knotted around themselves, her hands clutched up tight against her chest. Her voice was quavering. "I haven't seen either of them since this morning."

"Lander saw them together at twilight. Do you know what they're up to?"

Veseene shook her head, a barely controlled motion that could almost have been just another twitch. There was fear in her eyes, though. Lander snorted. "She doesn't know, Brin. Look at her."

The halfling's eye narrowed. He squatted down on the stool and stared at Veseene. The old bard stared back, a bird hypnotized by a snake. They stayed like that for a long moment before Brin flicked the blanket back at her and stepped down from the stool. He strode across the room, pulled open the door and walked out without another word.

Lander spared a last look at Veseene. She had the blanket clutched to her. "We'll find them," he told her. "If we don't, we'll be back."

He put his back to her and strode confidently after Brin. He didn't bother to close the door after himself.

Veseene waited until she heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open and close before she scrambled up—as hastily as she could manage—and pushed the door of their rooms closed. Can't sing, can't play, can't cast a spell. "Ah," she sighed to herself, "but I can still give a performance, Brin."

It wasn't just the palsy that made her hand shake as she slid home the bolt on the door, though. She leaned against the door for a moment before making her way back to the couch with slow, careful steps. She sat down and watched the wood in the fireplace burn.

Atenday's carefully hoarded supply, she thought, gone in

minutes. Damn Lander! Damn Brin!

Blessed Lliira, it is warm, though!

The traitorous thought brought a knot to her throat, and for a moment she thought she might cry. She rubbed her eyes. There was so much she could have done once and so little now. She could feel her hands tremble against her cheeks and lowered them to stare at her shaking fingers.

It had started with a twitch in her left wrist. She had thought little enough of it, but it had spread. Slowly. Over years. By the time she had sought to do anything, there was nothing that could be done—if there had ever been anything at all. She had sought out priests of three faiths known for their skills at healing. None had given her any hope beyond words of comfort. "It is the way of years. It is nature's course. Have faith that your suffering will be eased in the afterlife." She had carried on when the trembling had robbed her first of her grace then of the precise coordination that so much magic demanded. She was a bard—she learned to make magic with her voice alone.

Then the palsy touched her throat and lungs and stole her song as well. >

If she hadn't had Tycho, she might have given up then. Veseene couldn't remember when he had stopped being her apprentice and become her friend. Tycho had brought her back to Spandeliyon when all else had failed. He earned enough for them to limp along. He had found Sephera and the tea that had brought some dignity back into her life.

Veseene clenched her fingers into gnarled fists. She didn't know what he or Li had done to rouse Brin's anger, but she wasn't about to let the mad halfling take him so easily!

The tea box burning in the fireplace popped and crackled suddenly. Veseene smiled grimly to herself. She didn't know if the burning had been a deliberate act or if the box had simply been a handy target, but she did know that there was little in dockside that didn't come to Brin's attention sooner or later. He most likely knew about Sephera and possibly

about her special tea as well. Fortunately, he didn't know what box she kept it in. She shifted aside and dug between the blankets on the couch, past the knife Brin had rightly guessed was there, and pulled out a pouch. Still in the fine linen with which Sephera had wrapped it, her wasp venom tea made a comforting bulk within. The only thing Brin had burned was Tycho's very ordinary tea.

She set the pouch on the table and rose once more. This time she went to the shuttered windows. Rags and scraps had been stuffed into the cracks in the shutters in an attempt to keep out the winter wind. Veseene picked a bit of red wool out of a big knothole and put her eye to the hole. It took a moment for her vision to adjust to the darkness outside, but she saw exactly what she had expected to see. There was a man, not one of the neighbors, lingering in a doorway across the street. If she tried to leave and warn Tycho before Brin found him, she would be seen.

There might be another way.

Veseene went to the cupboard, fetched herself a cup, and opened the linen package of tea. With shaking hands, she measured out one dose. Then another. And another. The blazing fire had the kettle already boiling. Veseene wrapped her hands in rags, swung the kettle off the fire, and heaved it off the hook. The effort left her gasping and she had to rest before she could pour the hot water into her cup. The acrid smell of the tea stung her eyes as it always did—and worse for being triple strength.

Sephera had given her careful instructions on the taking of the tea. A single spoonful of the crumbled mixture, steeped, in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. More than that was dangerous. A single dose would ease her palsy for a time; stronger doses might suppress it but at the cost of cutting the effectiveness of weaker brews later.

That seemed like a small enough price now.

Veseene waited only until the triple-strength tea had grown dark red—like water-thin blood—and bitter before snatching

up the cup and sipping at it. The tea was hot. The touch of it scalded her tongue. She kept drinking as fast as she could, though, blowing across the surface of the liquid between sips. The scalded feeling spread across her tongue, but the warmth spread in her belly and throat as well. Before she had drained the cup to the granular mash at its bottom, the warmth had worked its way into her limbs and head, too. It settled there, like sharp fire. The cup didn't rattle against the tabletop when she set it down. Veseene held out a hand before her eyes. ,

It didn't move. Her ears were ringing. The light of the fire seemed especially bright, as if her pupils were wide after being too long in the dark. Veseene drew a deep breath and, for the first time in three years, sang. Truly sang.

The music was glorious, an explosion of joy from the core of her being—then magic swept over her as well, like an old lover come back. Veseene shivered at its touch and let the moment draw out. How long had it been? Too long. It couldn't last though.

The spell wasn't a powerful one. It needed guidance, a destination. She had told Brin she didn't know where Tycho was. That was the truth. She did, however, know her friend and one-time apprentice too well. If tonight was anything like most of Tycho's nights, she could guess where he would be. Eventually. The spell would wait for him. Veseene wove its magic into her song, shaping it and releasing it in a glorious burst. The shutters on the window knocked together as it passed through them like a gust of wind.

Her song faltered. Weakness surged over her and she grabbed at the table for support, swaying for a moment before easing herself around to her couch. The ringing in her ears was becoming a blinding headache. Sephera had never mentioned that the tea might do that! Veseene lay back, eyes squeezed tight against the glare of the fire and prayed

to Mystra, goddess of magic, that her guess had been right and Tycho heard her warning.

CHAPTER 8

The sun shone bright in a clear, pale sky. In the small formal garden of the family compound, Kuang Yu Chien's beaming face was almost as bright. "Yu Mao," he said.

Li watched his brother step forward, stiff and dignified, trying his best to imitate their elders. Heir to the workshops and fortune of Kuang, how could he do any less? Li tried his best to remain calm himself. It wasn't easy with a feeling like a hundred bees buzzing through his belly. In two years he would stand where Yu Mao did now. For the second son of Kuang, he knew, the ceremony would be less impressive, but what did that matter at a moment like this?

Yu Mao bowed low before their father, holding himself in the submissive posture for exactly the length of time that propriety demanded, no more, no less. Li could have counted the time, too—he had watched Yu Mao practicing for hours. There

was so much that the future head of the family needed to know, so many small details of etiquette, so many little rituals. Some day Yu Mao would be one of the most important men of Keelung, negotiating with traders and Imperial officials for the fine fabric of the silk families. Inscrutable, unflappable. Li had stood behind Yu Mao and peered through a screen watching Yu Chien negotiate, and on those occasions, their father was like some kind of wondrous automaton, flawless in his self-control.

Not today. The only rain of the fine summer afternoon stood out on Yu Chien's cheeks. Even so, his voice was strong and easy. "Blessings upon you, my son."

"Blessings on you, honored father." Yu Mao's voice was already deep. The formal words of the ceremony rolled out of him like cartwheels. "May your years be as numerous as leaves on a tree. May each of them give you memories as sweet as a peach."

"Leaves fall in winter and new buds come forth each spring. Every peach must ripen. Every boy must grow into a man." Yu Chien's smile quivered slightly with emotion as, for the first time, he bowed to Yu Mao. It was really little more than a nod, Li knew, but it might just as well have been the humblest abasement. "May your years be as numerous as leaves on a tree. May each of them give you memories as sweet as a peach." Yu Chien straightened. "Now, my son, take up the tools of a man."

He tapped his thumb and second finger together. To the left of his chair and standing beside Mother, Great-Aunt Ya made a more vigorous gesture and from behind a screen of bamboo stepped Cousin Mei, dressed all in red. Li caught his breath. She looked beautiful, more than a suitable match for the next patriarch of the Kuang. Yu Mao, however, seemed more interested in the red-stained

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case that she carried. Mei knelt before him and opened it. Resting on silk within was the most beautiful pair of butterfly swords Li had ever seen—easily as beautiful as Cousin Mei. They were adult weapons, heavier and much keener than a child's training blades. Yu Mao removed them carefully, inspected them, and bowed twice—once to his future wife and once, more deeply, to his father. "I will make the ancestors of Kuang proud," he promised. He bowed again and sunlight flashed on the butterfly swords...

... just as lantern light flashed on the cheap brass mesh that restrained the considerable bosom of the woman who walked boldly up to Li. "Olore, elf-man," she said with naked interest, "have you had a long voyage?" She leaned over so the shiny mesh shifted and exposed more of the shadowed chasm of her cleavage. "Maybe you're feeling a little lonely." Li was saved from having to respond by the sudden appearance of an older woman, rouge and powder thick on her face. The bawd seized the other woman's arm and hauled her roughly back toward one of the curtains at the

rear of the Eel. Li didn't quite catch the words she muttered, but their tone implied that an interest in making love to an elf was barely a step above perversion. He didn't bother trying to correct their misperceptions regarding his race. Clearly there were times when it was good to be thought of as an elf. Not many, though, not around the dark cave of the Eel. The woman in brass was the only denizen of the tavern who seemed interested in more than beating the lights out of the "elf-blood" who had wandered into their midst. It made the skin on his neck crawl, but he turned around and put his back to the noisy room, standing shoulder to shoulder with Tycho.

"If he's not here," the short bard was asking a big, bald bartender, "where is he? This is important."

The bartender just shrugged. "Always is when Black Scratch might be waiting for you, isn't it?"

Tycho flushed. "When will Brin be back?"

"Do I look like a bloody appointment book?" the bartender growled. "Brin doesn't tell me his comings and goings. He tells me how much to charge for ale and when to water it down." He plunked two mugs on the counter. "Buy yourself a couple and wait for him."

Tycho sighed. "Why not? Nothing better to do." Li winced and nudged him.

"We can leave and come back again," he said in Shou. "Why don't we go to the Wench's Ease and wait there?"

"You haven't had enough of tramping around in the cold?"

Tycho replied.

"I'm afraid that if we stay here, I'll catch some kind of disease." Li's first sight of the Eel had convinced him that he had made the right choice at the docks. Filthy, dark and stinking, foul with thick smokes and loud with the shouts of customers already deep in their cups, Brin's establishment had the feel of a place teetering on the brink of desperation. The moment he and Tycho had walked through the door in search of Brin, Li had wanted to turn around and walk out

again. The Wench's Ease was smelly, smoky, and loud as well, but at least there had been a lightness of spirit about it, a sense that its patrons were there to enjoy rather than lose themselves. "Can we go?"

Tycho crinkled his nose. "I want to get this over with. Let Brin go after Jacerryl and the Hooded if he wants his beljurils back. If you still want to talk to Brin about your brother, you should do that now, too. If Brin and the

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Hooded start a war, there's no telling when or if you'll get another chance."

The muscle along Li's jaw tightened. "I suppose not," he said, "but nothing will happen until we talk to him." He shuddered as angry shouts erupted from behind the other curtain at the tavern's rear, the one Tycho had said hid gambling tables. "You said you've got until tomorrow."

Tycho turned up his hands in defeat. "Water the beer for someone else," he told the bartender in Common. "We're going. If you see Brin, tell him I was looking for him."

"Didn't I say I'm not an appointment book?" The bartender flicked a rag at them. "Get your elf-blood friend out of here."

The air outside was chill and damp, but sweet. Li breathed it in gratefully as Tycho led him through the shadowed streets toward the Wench's Ease. The other man gave him a sideways glance. "You traveled the length of the Golden Way and you didn't see worse places than the Eel?"

"I saw them," said Li. "I didn't enjoy them. There was an oasis deep in the Endless Wastes where the natives refuse to allow any permanent buildings and the only tavern was a kind of vast tent that served ale brewed from millet in enormous goatskin bags. The tent walls were so thick with decades of greasy soot from braziers that they could have stood on their own. The women of the area seemed addicted to millet ale and to playing a game that involved knives and carved rune-bones."

"What did the men do?" Tycho asked curiously.

"Stayed away from the women. They spent most of their time out raiding and extorting tribute from caravans."

"What else did you see along the way?"

"A lot of grass." Li dredged his memory to come up with things that might be more interesting. "Ruins. Burial mounds so ancient no one knows who raised them. A pillar of smoke in the distance that the caravan masters said was likely the cook fires from a Tuigan wedding feast. A great tower that they hustled us past in the dead of night because legend said an ancient mage lived there and would enslave anyone he saw by daylight. Another night we heard something screaming in the distance, a sound like nothing any of us had ever heard."

A smile spread across Tycho's face. "No one went to see what it was?" Li shook his head. "I would have."

'< Li shook his head again. "You don't go chasing after strange sounds in the night along the Golden Way. You stay by your fire and defend yourself against what comes."

"If you don't chase things down, how do you know when the journey is interesting? All you'd see is the road."

"Many people would say that's enough. That, your destination, and your home again at the end."

Tycho snorted. Li looked at him and raised an eyebrow, but Tycho said nothing else. He was looking down at the ground, scowling as he walked. "You've traveled," Li said. "You know what I mean."

"I've been all around the Sea of Fallen Stars. The road is my home. A bard who doesn't travel is just waiting by the fire to see what comes of the night. I—" He cut himself off. Li gave him a long look, but Tycho just drew a breath and glanced up, the scowl falling away from his face to be replaced by his usual twisted smile. "A bard needs new stories no matter how he gets them, right? New songs come where you learn them; Veseene told me that herself. Lots of people visit Spandeliyon from all over. Who needs to go on the road when the road comes to you?"

Li's eyes narrowed. "In Keelung," he said, "when the
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silk families wear strangely colored clothes and declare it a new fashion, you know that a vat of dye went bad. You're trying to put a good face on a bad problem, Tycho."

The bard sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He was quiet for a moment then said, "Li, if this were happening to me anywhere else, I'd already be on the road to a new city. Brin has a long reach, but not that long. I can't do that, though. I can't run away. I can't leave Veseene." He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

Li patted him on the back. "I understand. I'd rather not be in Spandeliyon either." Tycho snorted again, but in stifled humor this time, and gave a grim smile. Li hesitated then asked, "Tycho, what about the Hooded?"

They were just coming into the yard outside the Wench's Ease. Tycho stopped beside the tree there. "Forget about him, Li," he said sternly. "It's easier to go through Brin. Isn't one gang boss enough to worry about? Ask Brin about Yu Mao first. Maybe he'll know how the swords got into the Hooded's hands. A juggler in Westgate taught me a saying: When you've got five balls in the air, you don't need to set them on fire."

"What does that mean?"

Tycho reached up and slapped his cheek lightly. "Do one thing at a time. We don't need this situation to get any more complicated." He turned, walked across the yard, and pulled open the door of the Wench's Ease.

For a moment, it seemed like an errant gust of wind had caught him. The bard's hair flew up and the skirt of his coat belled out. There was, however, no wind; the night air was still. And yet Li felt the edge of the breeze as well, a cool breath that tickled his ears like a snatch of song. He blinked. It was a song and he could almost imagine that he heard Veseene's voice in it.

Don't come home; it isn't safe. Brin is looking for you and Li.

Suddenly song and wind were gone. Tycho's eyes were wide. Li sucked in a breath. "Tycho, what was that?" he asked.

"A spell," Tycho said in wonder. "A spell from Veseene. But that's impossible; she hasn't been able to cast a spell in years!"

"It seems she managed it. Why would she try, though?"

"Brin." His voice was tight with concern. "Brin must have gone to see her. And she doesn't know I've already seen him." He glanced down and Li followed his gaze. Tycho's foot was just past the threshold of the tavern's open door. "A spell triggered when I entered the Ease. Veseene knows I come here most nights, so she sent the spell to warn me when I walked in."

Li frowned. "Tycho, why would Brin be looking for you at all? He gave you until noon tomorrow."

"Maybe he found out something more about the beljurils." Tycho ground his teeth together and moved through the door. "Hoar's black glove, if Brin hurt Veseene... "

Maybe it was because he had been so acutely aware of the different atmosphere at the Eel. Maybe it was because last time he had entered the Ease, it had been to raucous song. Either way, Li glanced up sharply as Tycho moved on and he got his first glimpse into the tavern. His hand shot out and grabbed Tycho's shoulder. Something was wrong. The patrons of the Ease were quiet. Very quiet. And not one of them was looking up at the newcomers or the open door. The entire tavern was on edge. "Careful!" he hissed in Shou. "This is an ambush!"

Tycho paused. His gaze swept the tavern and Li could

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tell he was coming to the same conclusion. The Shou braced the door open with his foot and slid his free hand down toward the Calishite scimitar he had taken from Giras the fence—and hesitated. If there was trouble, the long sword would be awkward to use in the crowded bar. He shifted his hand instead to Yu Mao's butterfly swords, freeing them from

the rags he had wound around their blades.

Tycho's gaze came to rest on a man standing against the bar, a cloak around his shoulders in spite of the tavern's warmth. Li recognized him from the previous night—one of Lander's men. Behind the bar, behind Lander's man, the broad-hipped bartender gave Tycho a helpless look.

"I know him," Li breathed.

"He's Ovel. That's Nico." At the back of the tavern, another man had risen and was tapping on a backroom door. Heads were starting to turn at the tables as patrons gave Tycho and Li the same helpless look as the bartender. Are they really all so afraid of Brin, Li wondered. He began to reassess Tycho's dark tales. "Lander had four men last night. There's probably someone behind us to make sure we can't retreat," he observed. Tycho nodded, took a deep breath, and shrugged Li's hand off his shoulder.

"Try to relax," he said. "Remember, we want to see Brin as much as he seems to want to see us. This could all be fine."

"And if it's not?"

"Then we've got five balls in the air and they're all burning." Tycho stepped forward, smiling pleasantly. Li followed. Pulling the tavern door closed after himself felt like closing the door of a cage.

"Tycho!"

It was the last thing Li would have expected to hear at the moment—a happy shout. It came from outside. He twisted around and shoved the door open again. Tycho turned as well. A cloaked and hooded figure was trotting across the yard toward them. Behind her, Li glimpsed movement in the shadows. Lander's man. Tycho's choke of surprise, however, was directed to the cloaked figure.

"Laera?"

"Oh, Tycho!" Li caught a glimpse of pretty brown eyes and a sharp nose before Mard Dantakain's daughter threw herself at his friend. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

' Li's eyes darted to the door at the back of the tavern, the

one on which Nico had knocked. It was opening. "Tycho ... " he hissed.

Tycho thrust the girl off of him. "Laera, this isn't a good time!"

"It's the perfect time." She stepped back and spread her cloak to reveal traveling garb—or at least a sheltered rich girl's idea of it. Clothes too heavy, boots not heavy enough, a satchel stuffed to overflowing. "Tycho, I want to be a traveler like you! I can't stand Spandeliyon anymore!"

Tycho blinked. "Bind me." He looked around quickly, tugged Laera's hood firmly over her head, and pointed her toward the bar. "Wait over there," he ordered. "That woman is Muire. She'll look after you."

"What?" Laera's voice was thin and confused. Li reinforced Tycho's words with a quick shove.

"Move, girl!" he ordered. She stumbled away. Li glanced at Tycho. "Did your juggler friend have advice for dealing with six burning balls?" Tycho shook his head. The bard's expression was tight. Li looked past him. At the back of the tavern, men were moving out of the backroom door. Men, a pig—and a one-eyed hin.

For the first time, Li set eyes on the former pirate whose name had brought him to this port. Brin looked just as hard and unpleasant as all of the stories in Telflamm and all of Tycho's tales had made him out to be. The huge boar that walked behind him, brushing aside the patrons who were too slow to get out of the way, could only be Black Scratch. Lander stood behind the pig, and behind Lander stood the last of his four men. Li clenched his jaw. His dao hung at Lander's side and the thug's man was wearing his waitao!

His hand gripped the butterfly swords tightly. Tycho gave a little shake of his head. "Words first," he murmured.

"What if words fail?"

"Don't stand between me and the door." Tycho took a deep breath, smiled, and started walking.

"Best face, sharp thoughts," Tycho murmured to himself as he stepped forward. No tricks, no games. This wasn't playing around. This was for real. Magic tugged on his thoughts like water just out of a thirsty man's reach. There was no question of a spell, though, he knew. Brin wouldn't give him even the fraction of a heartbeat it would take to cast one. "You're on your own, boy."

And Li was right. Something was up. Black Scratch's mad, red eyes were on him and the smell of the beast was thick on the air. He ignored him. Li, Laera, Muire— Veseene. He put them all out of his mind and focused on Brin. "Olore," he said pleasantly. "You know, I've just been down at the Eel looking for you, Brin. I wouldn't have expected to find you here."

"It's a night for the unexpected." Brin's eye shifted past him for a moment to settle on Li. Tycho fought the urge to gesture for the Shou to back down a bit. Instead he kept his arms loose, his posture confident. Lander, Nico, and Serg stepped out and began to move around between the tables of the Ease. One of the tavern's patrons started to shift. Lander shoved him back into his chair. Tycho tensed.

"Listen, Brin," he said, "I have news on the beljurils. I know where they are. Jacerryl stole them from me." The halfling's gaze came back to him. Tycho smiled hopefully. "Why don't we step outside? I can tell you everything. I mean, you gave me until tomorrow and all, right? What I've got for you might not be exactly what you want to hear, but it's going to clear everything up." He spread his hands. "I don't know what all of this is about, but nothing has to get messy here."

"You're right. It doesn't." Brin nodded. Lander and his men began to close in. Li hissed. This time, Tycho did step back and put a hand on Li's arm. Black Scratch's eyes followed his gesture and the pig let out a sharp, angry snort. Tycho's hand came back up immediately. Brin grinned. "You both just come with us and it won't get messy. Here."

Tycho froze. On his left, Nico moved closer.

"Tycho!" At the bar, Laera stepped forward suddenly. Just as quickly, Ovel reached out and wrapped an arm around her, holding her back and snatching down her hood. Long brown hair tumbled free. Brin's eye widened slightly.

"Is that... ?" His grin turned sharp and feral. "Tycho, you charmer! I think we've got another reason for you to behave yourself." He nodded and Ovel's arm tightened.

Laera stiffened, gasped, and screamed. Ovel's free hand reached under his cloak and drew out a short sword. Laera jerked, still screaming.

Tycho half-turned toward her.

Everyone moved at once.

Nico leaped at him. Tycho fell back, barely catching a flurry of action behind the bar as Muire snatched a hot mulling iron out of her brazier and thrust it hard into Ovel's back. Lander's man screeched louder than Laera and twisted away, his sword clattering from his hand to the floor. Tycho didn't have a chance to see more—Nico grabbed at him and he slid down to get away, staggering into Li as he did. The collision sent the Shou stumbling forward. Lander and Serg stepped in fast to seize him.

Except that Li's stumble somehow became instead a graceful lunge that put his fists hard into the thugs' guts. Lander grunted and staggered; Serg gasped and went reeling back, crashing into a couple of tables and sending ale flying.

Tycho would have stared in stunned awe if Nico hadn't reached down with both hands, grabbed the front of his coat, and dragged him to his feet. The bard seized the other man's forearms and slammed himself up and forward in a savage head butt that connected right under Nico's chin. His head snapped back. Tycho followed up with a fast knee to the crotch. Nico let go of him and dropped.

With Lander and his men suddenly in trouble, the crowd had found its courage as well. The Ease's patrons were surging to their feet, some diving to tackle Serg or Nico, some rushing

to the aid of Muire and Laera. Ovel had found his feet again. He still had a grip on Laera as well, one hand tangled in her flowing hair. Keeping well below the level of the bar so that Muire couldn't reach

him with her smoking iron, he was groping for his sword. Tycho caught a glimpse of his eyes as he saw the crowd coming at him. Any thought of threatening Laera forgotten, he let go of her and scrambled for his sword with both hands, only barely managing to grab it before the customers of the Ease could grab him. Twisting to his feet, Ovel swept the sword in short, dangerous arcs. "Keep back!" he snarled. The crowd—Muire at the head now—pressed as close as it could.

Tycho whirled around. "Li, we've—"

A tremendous, squealing trumpet cut him off as Black Scratch plunged into the fray. In the cramped confines of the tavern, the boar couldn't exactly charge, but with his massive weight behind him, a lumbering rush was enough. People scrambled to get out of the way of his tusks and hooves; someone fell and was simply trampled. Tycho dived across a table for safety. He dragged a knife out of a sheath at his belt—as if the little blade would do any good—but Black Scratch was headed straight for one target.

Li stared at the oncoming mass of bristles and tusks for only an instant before gathering himself and leaping high, grabbing for a wax-encrusted iron chandelier overhead and tucking his legs up tight.

Black Scratch passed completely under him, his weight and hooves suddenly a hindrance on the tavern's worn wood floor. Out of control, the pig careened through a tangle of chairs and tables and straight into the solid stone side of the Ease's fireplace. He staggered back and sat down like a drunk man waking in a strange place. Li pumped his legs, swung free of the chandelier, and landed lightly in an easy crouch. Metal scraped on metal as he drew the butterfly swords, a blade in each hand, one high, one low.

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More bare steel combined with Black Scratch's charge was enough for the Ease's patrons. Shouting in fear, courage forgotten, many rushed for the door. A few stayed to menace Ovel, but suddenly most of the tavern was clear. Tycho scrambled back to his feet—and saw the lithe little figure that rolled out from under a table behind Li. "Watch out!" he shouted. Li spun around, still crouched, and slashed out with a sword. Brin, a dagger in his fist, just tumbled aside. And tumbled again as Li's second blade swept around. Again and again, a roll ahead of each flashing blow, forcing Li to spin around to keep up with him.

Focused on the halfling, the Shou didn't see Lander loom up behind him, a broken chair leg in his hand. Tycho sucked in breath and raised his hand to cast a spell.

Lander was faster. "'Ware magic!" he spat at Brin and changed his target. Suddenly the chair leg was hurtling through the air at Tycho. The wood cracked into his outstretched arm and numbness rippled from his wrist to his elbow. The spell died on Tycho's lips, vanishing into a yelp of pain. Lander's stealthy attack was spoiled as well, though; Li hissed and spun back into a defensive stance, both butterfly swords at the ready. Lander didn't let him rest. The thug wrenched out Li's own saber and sent it at him in a powerful backhanded blow. Li just barely rocked back out of the way.

Brin whirled and threw himself at Tycho.

A gasp of panic forced itself out of the bard. He fell back, knife raised. Brin's dagger slashed out. Tycho only just slid away from it. He lunged at Brin in the wake of the blow but caught nothing but air. The one-eyed halfling bent like a snake—a snake with arms and one steel fang—and just kept coming, dagger weaving and stabbing, forcing Tycho back. Behind him, Lander was

bashing away at Li with ugly, brutal slashes. The Shou saber clearly wasn't his weapon of choice, but elegance wasn't something Lander was known for. An ugly blow still hurt. Li

was catching some of the blows with the butterfly blades, but it was obvious he would rather have held the saber than the twin weapons.

Lander's next blow fell. Li brought his left blade up and let the saber slide along its back all the way to the upswept guard and twisted, locking the longer weapon for a moment as he reached in underneath and cut at Lander with his right blade. Lander threw himself back. The butterfly sword sliced through his mantle and his dark-red tunic, but missed his flesh. Li wasn't so lucky. As he withdrew his left sword, releasing the lock on the saber, Lander thrust forward instead of pulling back. The saber sliced a shallow gash across Li's arm. He gasped and jumped away.

That gasp broke Tycho's desperate concentration on the glittering weave of steel before him. In a heartbeat, Brin lunged.

Tycho tried to dodge. His heels caught a fallen chair.

He went sprawling backward, backside slapping against the floor hard enough to shock the breath out of him. Brin stepped up between the bard's splayed feet.

"Tomorrow!" Tycho blurted desperately. "You said tomorrow!"

"I don't need a reminder!" Brin bellowed back. "Sweet but you're getting too big for your breeches, Tycho! Maybe it's time to fix that!" He flipped the dagger around in his grasp and hurled sharply almost straight down.

Tycho shoved his heels against the floor and scooted backward desperately. His back slammed up against the bar, bringing a jangle of protest from his strilling, but it was enough—Brin's dagger sank into the floor instead

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of into his groin. The halfling grabbed for the quivering weapon. Tycho brought up one leg and aimed a kick at him, but Brin just tumbled back again. He came to rest on top of a table.

With a hard scowl, he produced another dagger. Tycho yelled.

Across the room, Li caught and locked the saber with one butterfly sword and, before Lander could pull it away, locked it from the other direction with the second sword as well. He twisted sharply. The saber jerked right out of Lander's hand. Li let all three weapons clatter to the floor and thrust forward with a double-handed blow that hammered into Lander's chest and sent the thug flying backward to crash down across the still-groggy Serg. Whirling around, Li grabbed a chair in each hand. "Brin!" he shouted.

Brin's head snapped around. Li whipped one of the chairs at him. Brin kicked himself up, leaping over the chair as easily as Li had leaped Black Scratch.

The second chair caught him in mid-air and sent him slamming to the ground.

"Outside!" Li shouted at Tycho. "Get outside!" He scooped up the butterfly swords and his own saber and leaped for the door, tearing his scabbard from Lander's belt in passing. Tycho scrambled to his feet as well.

"Tycho?" Laera was curled up in the corner where the bar met the tavern wall. Her face was pale and she was trembling. She stretched out her arms like a child reaching for a comforting toy. Tycho cursed and brought himself up short. He grabbed one arm and hauled her roughly to her feet. She clung to him desperately. "Oh, Tycho!"

"Stop saying that!" He wrenched himself out of her embrace and dragged her toward the door. "Come on!"

Another squealing bellow froze him. Froze everyone who was still left in the tavern. Tycho twisted around to stare at Black Scratch. The boar was back on his feet and shaking off the last of the shattered furniture that had clung to him. His red eyes swept the room and settled on Tycho. He squealed again and charged. Everyone—the last few patrons, Muire, Ovel, Lander, dazed Serg, rage-pale Brin—scattered, flinging themselves out of the monster's way.

Tycho couldn't even form words. He just hurled himself at the door with a primal, panicked yell, Laera stumbling arid

shrieking in his wake, Black Scratch's thundering hooves coming after them. Tycho didn't look back. He plunged across the threshold and into the cold night air. The Ease's patrons were milling around in confusion in the yard outside. Tycho plowed into them, trying desperately to push his way farther from the door. Any moment now, Black Scratch's tusks would toss Laera aside and tear into him. He could almost feel the boar's hot breath—

When heat came, however, it came in a sudden flash of light arcing overhead. A heartbeat later, a scorching wave of force lifted and thrust them forward. Tycho staggered and half-turned. The ground outside the door of the Wench's Ease was steaming, the snow melted away. The milling crowd was fleeing. Inside the Ease, Black Scratch was squealing and thundering in panic and rage.

Then the wall beside the door bulged and creaked. The boar was coming out one way or another!

In the darkness, sudden light shimmered, brilliant and warm. Tycho whirled back around. To one side of the great bare tree, stood Li. His shirt was open and he was reaching across his body with his right hand, seeming to draw the light in a long shining strand out of his left

shoulder. As he pulled back his arm, the strand grew and thickened until it was the size of a javelin. Tycho gasped, grabbed Laera, and pulled her down into a crouch. Light flashed overhead again; scorching warmth blew past them once more.

"Up!" shouted Tycho. "Up!" He was running before Laera was even on her feet, literally dragging her for several steps toward Li through the muck of the yard. A glance back showed a patch of melted snow at the base of the Ease's wall, but the wood of the wall itself was smoking this time as well. There were still shouts and squeals from inside, but now the squeals sounded frantic with pain. The shouts were angry and defiant; Muire and her loyal customers were holding against Brin and Lander while Black Scratch hurled

himself against the walls in terror. Tycho slid to a stop before Li. The Shou was hurriedly refasten-ing his shirt. "What," Tycho gasped, "was that?"

Li shook his head. "Not here. We need to get away." He jerked his head at Laera; the girl was weeping, shivering, and sucking in huge hollow breaths. Tycho ground his teeth together and gave her a hard shake.

"Laera!" he snarled at her. "Go home!" She looked up at him with wide eyes. Mud streaked her face and hair. "Go home to your father!"

"But I want to be with you!" The words came out as a desperate wail and she grabbed for his arms again. "I want to travel, to—"

Tycho slapped her. "You want the road? This is the road. There's no glamor in it." He spun her around sharply. "Go that way. It will take you to a guard station. The guards will see you home. Now run!" He gave her a shove. She stumbled a few steps and looked back. "I said, go! Go!"

Laera wailed again and fled. Tycho didn't look after her. He grabbed Li and pulled him off into the shadows in another direction.

Tycho slid the blade of his dagger down the gap between two boards until he felt it catch slightly. He pressed to the side and a loose section of board on the right popped free. In the cavity behind it was a key. Tycho took it, replaced the board, and slipped around to the door of the net shed. Li was looking up at the shack doubtfully. "No one wiH find us here?"

"As long as we're quiet, no. The owners died recently." Tycho slid the key into the lock on the door and turned it. The lock gave way with a faint squeal. Li winced.

"How recently?"

"Did you see the body hanging on the tree outside the Ease last night?" The Shou nodded. "That was one of them." He pushed open the door and ushered Li inside, stepped

through himself, and closed the door behind them. A whisper of song put a soft magical glow around the key. He flashed it around briefly so Li could see their surroundings. Nets in need of mending. The tools to do it. Lines and reels. Coils of rope. Pitch and caulking. All the equipment fishing folk might need. The shed wasn't big, two paces in one direction, maybe four in another. It was cold—a gap ran across the top of the front and back walls just below the roof line so air could flow through and dry the nets. A tight mesh tacked over it kept out birds and vermin. The water of the Sea of Fallen Stars was close; the sound of the surf was constant. Tycho went to the chest where Ardo and Ton had kept a stash of blankets, water, and smoked fish. The water and blankets he shared

out with Li. The fish he left. He couldn't quite handle the thought of eating at the moment. Shielding the glowing key so that only a trace of light leaked through, he dropped down onto a coil of rope and looked hard at Li.

"You can't tell me you're just a clerk now," he said. "I've never seen a clerk fight like that. What exactly does the Department of Lost Treasures do?"

Li shrugged off the small armory of weapons that he wore or carried—scimitar, butterfly swords, and saber fell onto a folded net. He retrieved the saber, slid it out of the scabbard, and held it up in the light to inspect the blade. "The Emperor formed the Department of Lost Treasures as part of an effort to reclaim knowledge and great works lost by the more foolish of his imperial predecessors over the centuries. The Department of Lost Treasures searches out the fabulous artifacts and relics of old."

Tycho's look turned to open-mouthed wonder. "Bind me!" he spat. "You're a treasure hunter?" Li shot him a scowl.

"I'm not a treasure hunter." He thrust the saber back into its scabbard. "My responsibility is to look after the more senior clerks and scholars and keep them safe." >

"And those bolts of light? You're not a mage, too, are you?"

Li hesitated then opened his shirt and slipped his left arm free. The wound that Lander had inflicted on him was a sharp red line across his forearm, but twisted around his arm above the bicep was the dirty old rag Tycho had noticed before. The bard's eyes narrowed. "When I healed you last night, I tried to look at that to see if there was another wound underneath. Even half-unconscious, you fought back like it was the most important thing in the world." He leaned forward, taking a closer look at the rag.

In spite of its filthy and worn condition, it was clear that it had once been a piece of very fine silk. "What is it? A lost treasure from your department?"

"It has never been lost. It's a family heirloom entrusted to me by my father to help me in my search for Yu Mao." Li tugged at one edge of the rag, pulling free a clean fold. Tycho gasped—the dirt of the rag was only on the outside. Its true color exposed, the silk was...

Gold. No, buttercups. Saffron. Lemons. It was yellow, but a yellow so pure and exquisite that to call it that was demeaning. And yet there was no other word that could come close to describing it. It shimmered with light and warmth, that tiny exposed fold casting a glow that put his spell of light to shame. The very edge of the fold was ragged, however, and frayed. Tycho drew a breath. "Those bolts?"

"Threads of the Yellow Silk of Kuang, drawn forth and hurled at enemies," he said reverently. "I think the same magic kept me just warm enough to endure the snowbank after Lander left me for dead last night." Li folded the edge of the silk back over and its radiance vanished. "Keelung silks are famous for a yellow dye that the Kuang invented. The legends of my family say, however, that the first dyers and weavers of Kuang achieved even more." He brushed his hand over the dirty rag. "They captured the power of the sun in a magical banner."

"That's a banner?" Tycho asked in disbelief.

"Fine silk folds very small," Li said. "The Yellow Silk is bigger than it looks. Its power has also been called on many times over the centuries. It isn't as big as it once was. Even the finest silk wears and becomes threadbare with use."

Tycho looked at him narrowly. "With use?" He sucked in an angry breath. "You couldn't have used it earlier? You couldn't have used it last night against Lander and his men?"

Li snarled back just as hotly, dropping into Shou in his anger. "The Yellow Silk isn't some common mage's wand, Tycho! It's the symbol of my family's strength and prosperity. Its power is not used lightly. It hasn't been unfurled in public in more than a hundred years. Even many members of my family believe it to be only a legend and outside of Kuang, it's less than a myth." He folded his arms. "You are the first in three generations aside from the head of Kuang and his heir to see the Yellow Silk and certainly the first non-Shou to have ever even heard of it!" He looked down his nose at Tycho. "I thought you might appreciate that more, considering you seem to collect stories—and considering that the Yellow Silk kept Black Scratch from tearing into your hairy backside."

"I—" Tycho gritted his teeth, reining in his temper. "I do." He blew out his breath. "I'm sorry, Li. Thank you." He held out his hand. After a moment, Li took it and gripped it tight. Tycho patted their clenched hands. "We're in this together now, though. You haven't made a friend of Brin tonight. I don't think he's going to want to talk to either of us now." He released Li's hand and sat back.

"What about his beljurils, then? " Li asked as he slipped his arm back into his sleeve. "How are you going to convince Brin that Jacerryl was the one who stole them if you can't talk to him?"

Tycho blew out his breath and pushed his hands through his hair. Plans tumbled in and out of his mind. He couldn't run—he couldn't leave Veseene and she was in no condition to

travel. Make a hostage of someone or something Brin valued ... no, that was just a joke. Brin valued no one and nothing with the possible exception of Black Scratch and the thought of capturing the boar was ludicrous. Go to the guard? That thought made him snort out loud.

Carry the fight back to Brin? Stand up to the halfling? His snort turned into a shudder. He'd already done enough of that already. Tycho grimaced. This was how Brin always managed to trap his victims, wasn't it? A net of violence and desperation that struggling only pulled tighter. The only reasonable way out was not to struggle at all, to simply give in to Brin.

"Bind me," growled Tycho. He stood up and whirled out his blankets, spreading them across the ground. Li stared at him. "Go to sleep," Tycho told him. "We're going beljuril hunting tomorrow. If Brin wants the beljurils, we need to get them for him."

"But you said the Hooded—"

"Bitch Queen's wrath, I know what I said." Tycho flung himself down and stretched out. "I've lost track of how many balls we're juggling and which ones are burning. All we can do is try to keep as many as we can in the air until the fire goes out!"

Li sat down on his own blankets, his saber close to hand, and raised an eyebrow. "Tycho," he said seriously, "can we really trust Brin? If we get him the beljurils, is he really going to let me talk to him and let you go in peace?"

"I don't know." The bard looked up at the net-draped ceiling. "Brin has a kind of twisted honor. When he says he's going to do something, for better or worse you know he's going to do it."

"He said you had until tomorrow to get him the beljurils, but he came after you tonight." Li spread out his blankets and crawled between them. "That doesn't sound like any kind of honor to me."

Tycho stashed the glowing key in a pocket of his coat, smothering its light. The magic would fade by morning. The darkness in the shed was complete—eyes open or eyes closed, he still saw nothing. "It's no kind of honor at all," he admitted. "But Brin's up to something, I can feel it. If you can think of another option besides trying to get the beljurils back from the Hooded, I'd like to hear it because I can't think of a better one."

"I don't mind facing down the Hooded. I'd just like to know what Brin wants with us."

Us.

Tycho sat up sharply. "Li, Brin was looking for both of us! Veseene's message said the same thing. I'm the one he blames for losing his beljurils. What does he want with you? You're nothing to him. His men beat you up and robbed you." He drew a breath and his eyes narrowed. "The rubies you had hidden in your coat. Could Brin have found them? Could he be looking for more?"

"I looked at the coat when I fought the man wearing it." Li's voice drifted in the darkness. "It hadn't been torn. The rubies are still sewn up in it."

Tycho cursed and lay back down slowly. "Then what interest could he have in you?"

Li was silent for a moment before he answered.

"Yu Mao," he said. "He knows I'm looking for Yu Mao."

He knows I'm looking. The thought washed through Li's mind, relentless as the waves in the dark. Tycho drifted off to sleep; his snores were soon grating on the air. Li lay awake, staring into the darkness. Turning that thought over in his head. Remembering the hin's one-eyed gaze in the Wench's Ease. He knows I'm looking. Brin wanted him.

And yet for the first time since he had heard Brin's name mentioned in Telflamm, he didn't want Brin.

He flexed his left arm and felt the reassuring tightness of the hidden Yellow Silk, token of his father's trust and testament

to the desperation of his journey. Soon, he promised himself. It would all be over soon. He closed his eyes. <

Lander stared morosely at the floor of the Eel's gambling room. Brin had ordered the room closed as soon as they had returned from the Wench's Ease. Lander and his men had found themselves waiting on the halfling's pleasure while he took Black Scratch out to the sty. The boar's snout had been scorched by whatever magic had prevented the animal from pursuing Tycho and Mard Dantakain's daughter out of the Ease. He glanced around at his men. Ovel was trying to stretch around and rub ointment onto his burned back. Serg winced every time he flexed his abdomen. Nico was surreptitiously touching his groin as if making sure all of his bits were still there. And Bor... Bor was holding a rag filled with snow to a blackened eye—Lander had inflicted that on the idiot himself for staying outside the Ease when he should have had the brains and guts to get in and join the fight.

And a black eye is going to be nothing compared to what Brin will do to us all, he thought. The halfling couldn't be happy that Tycho and Li Chien had slipped through their

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fingers. A happy fantasy flitted through Lander's mind: kill Brin and seize control of his operations. He shook his head to dislodge the idea. Not that he didn't like it. He just didn't like the thought of what might happen if he failed.

A door banged closed and a moment later the curtains across the gambling room entrance twitched aside. Brin walked in. Lander—and Ovel and Serg and Nico and Bor—stared at him.

He was smiling. He was happy.

Lander swallowed. "Uhh ... Brin?"

"Something worrying you, Lander?" Brin sauntered over to a comfortable chair and sprawled across it. He nodded sharply to Bor. "Get me a mug of ale." Bor dashed away, grateful for the moment of escape. Brin's gaze settled on Lander again.

"You should be worried. That was clumsy."

Lander held back the observation that Brin had been no more successful himself. "Tycho said something about knowing where the beljurils are, Brin. He has to bring them to us tomorrow. We can get him and the Shou then."

"After tonight, I wouldn't bring anything to me." The halfling waved his hand. "Never mind Tycho and the beljurils. I want Kuang Li Chien."

"Why?" grunted Ovel.

Brin fixed him with a harsh stare. "Because I do." His fingers flicked and suddenly a knife stood between them. "Reason enough?" Ovel swallowed and nodded. A grin spread across Brin's face and he sat up straight. "We'll keep looking for Tycho and Li Chien tomorrow morning— and deal with the Wench's Ease, too. More important, I'm going to need messages waiting at three places uptown first thing in the morning."

"Where and who for?" asked Lander.

Brin held up a pinky finger. "Hanibaz Nassor at his home in Burned Street." Ring finger. "Mosi Anu at the Sil-verbell Inn." Middle finger. "Thaedra Korideion at Nelka Marsk's home near the citadel."

Lander said nothing. Brin raised an eyebrow as if daring him to comment, and after a moment Lander could hold back no more. "Two Red Wizards and a Chessentan mage," he said softly. "The same customers you were going to sell the beljurils to."

"Exactly." Bor came brushing through the curtains and handed Brin a mug of ale that was only slightly smaller than his head. The halfling raised it to Lander. "I'm going to offer them the chance to bid on something even better than beljurils. Something completely unique, very kindly brought west by Kuang Li Chien. An artifact of Shou Lung that contains the power of the sun itself—" Brin gave a calculating grin so cold it made Lander shiver. "—the Yellow Silk of Kuang!"

CHAPTER 9

Something not quite right brought Li's eyes open sharply. White light filtered into the shed through the gap under the roof—the light of early morning reflected off new snow. Around the sound of Tycho's snoring, he could hear the ocean and the wooden creak of boats at their moorings, the sounds of a port coming to life.

He could hear the heavy tramp of feet in new snow, a curse on the ocean weather, the slap of flesh on flesh as someone took a sharp cuffing.

The sounds of men about no good business.

He turned swiftly, reaching out and clamping a hand over Tycho's nose and mouth. The bard's eyes shot open. He sucked air against Li's palm and might have struck out if Li hadn't grabbed his hand.

"What was that?" came a voice from outside.

"Nothing, Bor. Nico just broke wind."

The second voice was Lander's. Tycho froze and his eyes went wide. Li took his hand away. For a moment, they both lay very still, listening. "Damn snow."

"For the last time, keep your mouth shut. You'll draw the Bitch Queen's ire!"

The sound of another cuffing and a whining grunt of pain. Serg's voice. "Damn sailor superstitions! I'm not cursing the sea. I'm cursing the snow!"

"Sea, sea weather—same thing."

"I'm no sailor!"

"I guess you've got no plans to ever go anywhere on a boat, then, hey?"

The bickering voices drew close to the shed. Underneath them, Li could make out another sound: a kind of wet snuffling accompanied by heavy breathing. Tycho went pale. Li gave the bard a puzzled look. Tycho pushed the end of his nose up and crinkled his face in imitation of a pig.

Of Black Scratch. Lander had the boar with him. In parts of Shou Lung, some types of pigs were used like dogs to sniff

out things. Brin must have set Black Scratch to the same task. Li swallowed and silently blessed the snow as enthusiastically as Serg cursed it.

The snuffling sound receded, though the voices were still close. Li rose silently and stepped up to the wall. Raising himself on his toes, he could just peer out through the mesh that covered the air gap under the roof. As he had guessed, a layer of wet new snow covered the ground outside, though the day was warming and it was already showing signs of melting. Lander and his men—Serg still wearing his waitao!—were taking their time sauntering up the street. In spite of the insults they tossed at each other, the five men looked about sharply. Li froze as Lander's

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gaze swept over the shed, but from his distance and angle, the man must not have been able to see anything through the tight mesh. His gaze moved on.

Black Scratch was across the street, trotting along like a big, ill-tempered dog. His tracks marked a crisscrossing pattern in the snow, though. Only moments ago, the beast had passed within a few yards of their hiding place. Li let out a thin sigh. A narrow escape, he thought.

Tycho nudged him. The bard was standing at his side but even on his toes was too short to see out. He mimed peering outside. Li nodded curtly and gestured in the direction Lander and his men were headed and motioned for Tycho to remain calm. The thugs were moving on. They hadn't been discovered.

Out on the street, Lander stopped abruptly, looking ahead sharply. Li stifled a curse and twisted his head to try and see what he was looking at.

More men were coming along the street. This group, however, wore the uniforms of city guards and they were looking around just as intently as Lander's men were. Li stifled another curse. Walking at their head was Mard Dantakain.

Tycho's face was twisted in frustration but Li waved him down. Outside, Lander and Mard were eyeing each other mistrustfully as the two groups met. Lander spoke first. "Captain Dantakain."

"Lander." The captain glanced distastefully at the men before him and at Black Scratch. "What are you doing out from under your rock so early?"

"Out for a stroll."

Mard didn't seem fooled. Or interested. "So are we." "Fine day for it."

"I won't keep you standing, then. Olore." He strode forward, forcing Lander to hop out of his way. Lander grunted and snarled at his men—they all moved aside. Thugs and guards separated, each group moving a little faster now, eager to put distance between themselves. Within moments, the street outside the shed was empty.

Li dropped down from his toes and leaned against the shed wall. He glanced at Tycho. "You heard?"

The bard's eyes were squeezed shut. "I heard."

"Is the guard looking for us, too?"

Tycho snorted. "Because of what happened at the Ease? I doubt it. The guard doesn't care that much about dockside." He opened his eyes and exhaled. "It's Laera." He looked up at Li. "Mard is looking for Laera. She didn't make it home last night."

"You sent her to a guard station."

"I know."

"Could Brin have her? He had Lander's man hold her hostage last night."

"Maybe, but I don't think he does. If Brin were holding her hostage to use against me, he wouldn't have Lander walking the streets. He'd just put the word out and let me come to him." Tycho clenched his jaw. "Not that it would work." Li looked at him and he scowled. "I got her out of the Ease last night. I sent her on her way. She's a stupid girl and she's on her own. I'm not going to be responsible for her."

"Tycho... "

The bard held his hands over his ears. "No. I'm not going to listen—I'm not going to worry about her. We don't know she's in danger. Her father's the captain of the guard. If he can't find her, there isn't much we could do to help. And we've got serious problems of our own." He lowered his hands. "Brin hasn't given up looking for us.

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Or at least for you. What was so special about Yu Mao that Brin would hunt you like this?"

"I don't know," said Li smoothly. "It's something to ask him—once we have the beljurils."

"Be careful, Li," Tycho sighed. "That's starting to sound like a desperate measure. I'm not even sure Brin's going to want to see me when ... 1/we get the beljurils back."

"We're desperate men, Tycho." Li stood and stretched up to peer out of the air-gap once more. "You said last night you couldn't think of a better plan. Have you thought of one this morning?"

"No."

"So how do we find the Hooded?"

Tycho sighed again. "That's not so simple. Brin is easy to find—unless you're a complete stranger to Spandeliyon, of course. But the Hooded. ... " He rubbed his eyes. "Nobody goes looking for the Hooded. Usually the Hooded finds you." He leaned back, hands behind his head, and frowned in thought. "Jacerryl Dantakain might know something, though. We know he's done business with the Hooded once or twice. After last night, we're not likely going to be able to talk to him anytime soon,' though."

Li's eyes went wide as he watched a tall figure with carefully groomed hair and two very full packs creep out of an alley across the way and turn down the street. "I wouldn't be so sure!" he said sharply, pushing himself away from the wall and leaping for the shed door. He wrenched it open and charged across the street.

Jacerryl Dantakain barely had time to look up and yelp. He tried to run, but Li had his hands on him before he managed to take a step. Quick as a wet cat, Li hustled him back into the alley and snapped a fist across his jaw. Jacerryl spun around. One of the packs that he carried slipped off, falling to the ground with the jingling rattle of many coins. Li kicked it aside and pinned Jacerryl against the wall. "Going somewhere?" he asked him. He punched him sharply in the belly.

"Li!" Tycho skidded to a stop inside the alley. For a moment, his mouth dropped open at the sight of Li's captive. Only for a moment, though, then it turned up into a crooked smile. "Olore, Jacerryl," he said pleasantly. Jacerryl groaned. Li wrenched him upright and held him there.

"Look in his bag," he told Tycho. The bard knelt and opened the fallen pack. His hands dug through hastily crumpled clothes and emerged with a heavy pouch. Two heavy pouches. Tycho caught his breath and stood up. He held the pouches out in front of Jacerryl.

"You walking, talking bucket of chum." His smile didn't waver. "You were running."

Jacerryl spat out a mouthful of blood. He didn't do a very good job of it, though. Bloody spittle streaked his chin and the front of his coat. "Why shouldn't I?" he gasped. "There's a ship in the harbor. You think I'm going to wait for Brin to come and get me? You'd do the same if you could. I know it!" He flicked his head at the pouches. "Keep one and let me go." Li tightened his grasp on him. Jacerryl's eyes shrank in pain. "Keep both!"

"Both? That's a generous offer. What would you use to buy passage ? " Tycho stepped in close and pulled Jacerryl's coat open. Another pouch hung at his belt. Tycho ripped it free. "How much is in your other pack?" Jacerryl closed his mouth tight.

Li opened it for him with a slap across his face.

"Bastards!" snarled Jacerryl.

Li slapped him again before Tycho caught his arm. The bard gave Jacerryl a hard glare. "I don't care if you run, Jacerryl. There's nothing I'd like better than to see you squirming in the muck of Brin's pigsty, but you tell me one little thing and I'll let you go." Jacerryl blinked and Tycho's smile crooked higher. "How do I find the Hooded?"

Jacerryl stared at him, looked to Li, and looked back again. "That's it? That's it and you'll let me go?" He stood a little straighten "Go to Crown Alley on the east side of middle town. There's a cellar entrance to a leatherworker's shop. Knock and say you've come about a saddle."

"A saddle?" growled Li. Suspicion was sharp in his mind. He twisted the hand that held Jacerryl and the man gasped. Tycho elbowed him.

"Easy," he said. "I think he's telling the truth. Spandeliyon is a port town. There are only a few horses anywhere. No one would normally ask for a saddle around here." Tycho looked back at Jacerryl. "One other thing—what about Laera?"

Jacerryl groaned but raised his head. "Laera? She's run away. Mard's in a fury. He thinks you had something to do with it."

"Of course he does." Tycho stepped back. He dropped the three pouches at Jacerryl's feet and nodded to Li. "All right," he said, "let him go."

Li looked down at the man in his grasp. He was going to have the chance to get away while Tycho suffered? Li's eyes narrowed.

His fist jabbed against Jacerryl's jaw twice. When he released his grasp on him, Jacerryl fell back against the wall and slid down to sprawl in the snow. Li looked up at Tycho. "What?" he asked innocently. "I let him go." He stooped down and scooped the pouches into Jacerryl's fallen pack, tugged the other pack off his body, and shoved it at Tycho. The bard turned his smile on him. "Thanks," he said.

"If you can't go anywhere, it didn't seem right that he should." He straightened up. "I'll get my dao and we can go find this Crown Alley."

Tycho grabbed his shoulder. "Notyet," he said. "There's someone I want to see first."

Standing on top of Li's shoulders made it easy to stretch up to the window and rap a rhythm on the shutters. One-two-three, pause, one-two. Pause. Repeat. Pause. Repeat.

"Hurry up!" hissed Li.

"You're not waiting on me," Tycho murmured back. He knocked on the shutters again, a familiar pattern that he and Veseene had arranged as a code years ago. She would come—if she could. Tycho bit his lip. What if Brin had hurt her when he came last night? What if he had come past again later, seeking retribution for what had happened at the Wench's Ease? What if Veseene wasn't alone? What if—

There was a slow shuffling and the sound of hands fumbling with the shutters. Tycho ducked as they swung open and Veseene looked down at him. "You could have stopped knocking!" she rasped. "It takes time for me to get around!"

Tycho grabbed the windowsill, hauled himself into the cold and dark second chamber of their rooms, and swept his friend up in a hug. "I was worried, Veseene."

In spite of her harsh words, Veseene sagged against him. "So was I. You heard my warning?"

"Yes, but too late. Brin was already waiting for us at the Ease." Veseene drew a sharp breath. "Don't worry," Tycho assured her. "We got away." He moved farther into the room. A quick glance down into Bakers Way had revealed the watch being kept on the door of their building. Fortunately, Brin hadn't thought to set a similar watch on the alley behind it, the alley that Tycho's bedroom window overlooked. A chest yielded a stout rope. He knotted one end of it around a bed post and flipped the other out the window to Li. "Veseene," he asked as the Shou tied Jacerryl's packs to the rope, "how did you manage to cast that warning spell?" Li tugged on the rope and Tycho began to pull up the packs.

The old woman flushed. "I tripled the strength of my tea."

"You did what?" Tycho flinched and the rope slid back between his fingers. He hissed in pain and closed his hands, though not before Li let out a little curse from down below. Tycho glared at Veseene. She looked at him and raised her eyebrow. >

"You're going to say it was stupid," she said stubbornly. "If it was, at least I'm not the only one who's been doing stupid things lately."

Tycho winced. "Brin," he said. He heaved the packs over the windowsill, untied them, and dropped the rope back down. Veseene looked at the packs in astonishment. "I'll tell you all about them," said Tycho, "but Brin. ... " He sighed and confessed. "To make extra coin, I've been running packages between Brin and Jacerryl Dantakain."

There was a squeak of surprise, but not from Veseene.

Tycho looked up sharply. Peering through the open door to the front room was Laera Dantakain.

"Bind and tar me!" yelled Tycho—just as Li put his weight on the rope. Tycho stumbled forward and slammed against the wall. This time, Li's curse from down below was louder and accompanied by angry instructions for Tycho to brace himself. The bard did, but through clenched teeth, he managed to hiss out, "What's she doing here?"

"That," Veseene said darkly, "would be one of the other stupid things you've done, wouldn't it?"

Tycho groaned and only partially at the strain of holding the rope for Li. Once the Shou had his arms over the windowsill, he let go of the rope and staggered into the warm front room. Laera backed up before him. Her eyes were defiant. Her face bore an angry red mark on one cheek where he had slapped her last night. Tycho's gut twisted. He turned away, but just came face to face with Veseene as she and Li emerged from the back room. "I sent her to a guard station," Tycho protested.

"I got lost." Laera found her voice. "A woman found me."

"Rana," said Veseene. She pushed past Tycho and sat on the couch, drawing Laera down beside her. "She saw you two at the Ease last night and when she couldn't get any sense out of Laera, she brought her here. I got her calmed down. She told me what happened last night. She also told me what else has been going on during her music lessons."

"Nothing has been going on! Nothing!" Tycho stepped up and knelt down in front of the couch. "It was just—"

Veseene's hand darted out and slapped him.

The blow wasn't hard, but it hurt him more than Tycho could have imagined. He looked down at the floor in shame then up again. He turned to Laera. "It was flirting, Laera. That was all. I'm sorry." He stuck out his chin. "Go ahead," he said, "take a shot."

Laera didn't hesitate. Her slap had more strength behind it, though, and it caught his lip against his teeth. Tycho reached up and touched his mouth. His finger came away with a spot of blood on it. He wiped it on his pants. "Better?" he asked. Laera nodded. "Good." He stood up. "Your father is looking for you."

"I know." She looked up at him. "He's already been here. It was the first place he looked."

Tycho blinked in confusion. "Then what are you still doing here?"

"I sent him away," said Veseene. "I told him I hadn't seen her."

Laera sat up straight, taking Veseene's hand in her own. "I still want to leave Spandeliyon, Tycho. I want to travel with you. If you'll have me, I want to be your apprentice."

"What?" exploded Tycho. "No! No!" He stomped around the room. "Of all the stupid..." He flung himself down on the edge of his cot. Head in his hands, he told Veseene and Laera everything. Her uncle's duplicity brought another gasp from Laera, but Veseene just sat still and listened. When Tycho had finished, she gestured for him to come closer. He did.

She slapped him again and glared at Li. "Didn't I tell you he gets into enough trouble on his own?" The Shou shrugged.

"It's not all his fault," he pointed out. "It was only because he's helping me that Brin came here last night." Veseene grunted and looked back at Tycho. Her former apprentice threw up his hands.

"I'm an idiot," he said. "Go ahead. Say it." He turned to Laera. "Go home," he said. "You'll be a lot safer there. I'm not leaving Spandeliyon any time soon and I'm not even going to think about taking you as an apprentice right now. I have to go steal beljurils from one ruthless gang boss just so I have a chance at appeasing another ruthless gang boss!"

Laera folded her arms. "I don't have to leave Spandeliyon, but I'm not going back to my father's house."

Tycho stared at her in amazement for a moment before grinding his teeth together. "Bind me, you're as stubborn as he is! Fine! Just..." He searched for alternatives that would at least keep Laera out of their way. "Just stay here, then. Keep an eye on Veseene. We can sort this out after I've finished getting the Hooded good and mad at me!" He rose and went back into the back room, aiming an angry kick at Jacerryl's packs in passing.

He heard Veseene's shuffle behind him a moment later. "What is it?" he snarled. "Do you really think I should take Laera as an apprentice? I'm not ready to have an apprentice of my own!"

"Actually, I think you are," Veseene said calmly. "And I think that if Laera is willing to ride out all of the rejections you've been giving her, she might make a good apprentice, too."

Tycho turned and dug into his chest. "But half of her expectations come out of ballads and romance tales. She knows almost nothing about the world outside of Spandeliyon!" He stiffened and turned around. As he expected, Veseene's eyebrows were arched high. "Don't you dare say she reminds you of a certain Spandeliyon dock rat." Veseene shrugged. "A bard can have her roots in high town

just as well as in dockside." She sat down on his bed.

"Take her as an apprentice or send her back to her father, the choice is yours just as much as it is hers. I didn't follow you to force a decision on that. You're right—you've got other things to deal with right now. What's your plan for getting the beljurils away from the Hooded?"

"I hadn't gotten that far yet," muttered Tycho. He kicked his chest. The lid fell shut with a bang. "I'll think of something, though."

"Good," said Veseene. "May I make a suggestion? There's a spell I know—"

Tycho rounded on her instantly. "A spell? Veseene, I remember what Sephera said. Increasing your dose of the tea will make it less effective later. It's not worth it for one spell!" Veseene smiled and reached up. Tycho braced himself for another slap, but she just patted his cheek.

"Tycho, I care about you. Sometimes you really are an idiot, but I'll do whatever I can to pull you out of your messes. I've been doing it for years and that's never going to change." She patted his cheek again—and slapped him a third time. "If you listen to anything I tell you today, listen to this: you need help! Stop fussing and take it!"

Tycho stared at her and smiled. "When did you get so cranky, Veseene?"

"It started when I took an apprentice." She raised her voice. "Someone put the kettle on the fire!"

Lander walked through the back door of the Eel—behind him, the pigs of Brin's sty squealed with mingled excitement and fear as Black Scratch made his return— and into the festhall's main room. Even in the middle of the morning, the Eel had a few patrons burying faces in mugs. Lander walked up to the day shift bartender, a man as weedy as his nighttime counterpart was big. "Where's Brin?" he asked wearily.

"Blue Room," said the man tersely. "With visitors."

Visitors. Lander drew a deep breath, walked across the main room to a blue-painted door, and stepped through into the best of the Eel's private rooms. Four figures turned to look at him. Brin was the only one who looked pleased to see him. Lander closed the door softly behind himself and took stock of the three mages who sat listening to the halfling's description of the Yellow Silk of Kuang.

Mosi Anu looked exactly like everyone's expectation of a Red Wizard of Thay: tall, lean, and hawklike, shaved smooth, and swathed in robes of brilliant red. Tattoos literally crawled across his scalp. Every time Lander looked away or even blinked, he had the uncomfortable feeling that the tattoos had shifted. Mosi only occasionally visited Spandeliyon, but when he did it was always to deal with Brin. He sat closest to the halfling, listening intently to his every word.

Thaedra Korideion sat on the opposite side of the room. She was tall and thin as well, but unlike the Red Wizard, she carried herself with a graceful elegance that commanded attention. The first time Lander had met her, he had fallen into an easy, obedient awe in her presence. Brin had poked him with a knife just to rouse him. Thaedra was an enchantress—Brin said that at her home in Chessenta, she was served by a small army, all slaves to her will and beauty. Lander had kept his distance from her ever since.

The third mage... Lander still had difficulty believing that Hanibaz Nassor was a mage, let alone a Red Wizard. Hanibaz was a hefty, jovial sort who liked an evening at the Eel. His hair was thick, his only visible tattoos were on his arms like any number of sailors, and the only red about him was a wide sash over his belly. Most of Spandeliyon had no idea he was a Red Wizard and word was that Hanibaz liked it that way because he was actually a Thayan spy. He sat farthest from Brin, sprawled out in his chair with a mug of ale close to hand.

Of the three, Lander trusted him the least. As usual, he was the first one to speak when Brin finished. "I'm intrigued," he

said. "The Silk would be a great curiosity if nothing else." Hooked like a fish, Lander thought. Hanibaz's words might have been casual, but his left hand was fidgeting, thumb spinning a ring on his middle finger around and around. He only did that when he was well and truly interested in something.

"A curiosity is likely all it will be," sniffed Mosi Anu. "These legends you've been telling us are preposterous. A bunch of uneducated weavers and dyers catching the power of the sun in a piece of cloth?"

He was hooked, too. Mosi and Hanibaz were rivals. Anything Hanibaz wanted, Mosi would treat with disdain—until he was able to snatch it out from under Hanibaz.

"Thaedra?" asked Brin.

The Chessentan stretched. "Exotic, powerful, unbelievably old. Brin, you know I want it."

Her voice throbbed with power. Lander forced his eyes up to the ceiling and bit down hard on his tongue to distract himself from her. Even the Red Wizards must have felt her sway. Hanibaz broke the moment with a biting, "Exotic, powerful, unbelievably old—Thaedra, my dear, that could be your smallclothes!"

Mosi Anu frowned dourly, but Brin laughed and even Lander snickered. Thaedra turned a burning gaze on Hanibaz. "Brin," she said haughtily, "when will we be able to see this fabled silk?"

"Thaedra," said Brin with a clever smile and a glance back at Lander, "the Yellow Silk of Kuang—"

Lander winced and gave a tiny shake of his head.

Brin's smile faltered for a moment then came back strong. "—will be available for your examination shortly. While you wait, the facilities of the Eel are yours."

"How disappointing." Thaedra rose. "I don't think it's worth my time to wait. Brin, between this Yellow Silk and the beljurils, you've left me unsatisfied twice this past tenday. Next time, try to have the merchandise available

before you drag me all the way down here." Brin flushed as she walked out of the room and Lander wasn't sure which he shied away from more: her aura of power or Brin's violent wrath. The halfling looked to the Red Wizards. Hanibaz shrugged.

"I don't mind waiting. Mosi?"

His rival's lips narrowed. "I want to see the look on your face when Brin unveils some Shou's handkerchief." He sat back in his chair.

A measure of satisfaction returned to Brin's face. "Very good." He hopped to his feet and bowed to each of them as he walked to the back of the room. "I'll send someone in to see to your needs." He turned his smile on Lander. "A word with you outside?"

A hard shove didn't leave any room for refusal. As soon as the blue door slammed shut behind them, Lander gasped out an explanation. "We looked everywhere, Brin! We couldn't find Tycho or Li Chien. Even Black Scratch couldn't pick up their scents."

Brin growled under his breath, but to Lander's relief, he didn't lash out. "Don't worry," he said. "I have a plan." He started toward the festhall's back door. "I'll be back. Wait here and keep an eye on things."

"Things?" Lander shot a glance at the blue door. "Brin! What am I supposed to do?"

"Anything they want, Lander." Brin turned around briefly. "This could take some time. Keep Hanibaz and Mosi happy and keep them here." His eye narrowed. "If I don't have two mages to bid on the Yellow Silk when I get back, I'm not going to be happy."

He disappeared. Lander swallowed. He drew his mouth up into a forced smile and stepped back into the Blue Room.

CHAPTER 10

Crown Alley seemed like a prosperous street, if not an especially busy one. The homes and shops that lined its twisted length were in good repair. Some of the shops even

boasted signs with only words and no pictures, an indication that they expected a better class of literate clientele. Pretentious, thought Tycho. Crown Alley ended in high town, but it started in dockside.

The pretention of the street had one tremendous benefit, though. The snow had been cleared away, shoveled up in great heaps. The walking was easier than pretty much anywhere in dockside. Drier, too—the temperature had risen above freezing again and in dockside, snow was turning into wide, slushy puddles. In Crown Alley, the melt water flowed into a carefully cleared gutter and gurgled its way down to the sea.

Tycho stamped on the paving stones, knocking off the wet clumps that clung to carefully cleaned boots. His coat was clean, too, dirt and stains brushed away by Laera. His strilling had been left behind. He wore his best clothes, his dark curls had been brushed and dressed, and he had shaved again—two days in a row! All the way through middle town, young women and old had turned to watch him pass. Tycho had favored them all with a smile and the prettiest ones with a wink.

Smiles and winks covered up a case of nerves as bad as he had ever had.

He found the leatherworker's shop. Four steps took him down into a shadowed stairwell opposite a heavy door—strangely heavy for a simple shop. There was an iron knocker set in the door's center. He lifted it and knocked sharply.

A hatch in the door opened and eyes peered out. "Yes?" asked a woman's voice pleasantly. Tycho gave his best smile. "I've come about a saddle," he said. The eyes looked him over and disappeared as the hatch shut. A bolt was drawn and the door opened. The woman on the other side looked as tough as a piece of the leather that filled the cellar beyond her. She gestured him inside. Tycho entered, pausing just inside the door to let his eyes adjust from the

brightness of the street. The woman hissed at him.

"In or out, make up your mind."

"In," Tycho replied and took another step forward. The woman shut the door behind him. A tall man appeared through an interior door as she returned to a workbench. He gave Tycho another looking over and pointed at the long, fabric-shrouded bundle the bard carried.

"That a sword?" he asked. Tycho nodded. The tall man grunted. "Leave it here."

"I can't. It's what I came about." He flipped back the cloth to reveal the hilt of Li's saber. "I understand the Hooded has an interest in exotic weapons." The tall man's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

Tycho smiled at him. "No one," he said. "I'm just here about a saddle."

"Sweet chum right you are." The tall man held out a meaty hand. "I'll carry the sword." Tycho hesitated for a moment, folded the cloth back over the saber, and handed it to him. The tall man hefted the weapon like an expert and grunted approvingly at the weight. "This way," he said, turning back to the inner door. Tycho followed him through. He held the door wide for a moment.

"You don't often see an inside door this heavy," he commented.

The tall man paused on a flight of stairs leading up. "No, you don't. But if you're lucky, you'll see it again on the way back out. Now close it." Tycho shrugged, pulled the door shut, and stomped up the stairs after him. They would be on the main floor of the house above the leatherworker's shop now, he guessed. The stairs, however, led into a short hallway with murder slots in one wall—he wouldn't have wanted to come up the stairs unannounced. A crossbow bolt fired through one of those slots would probably put a hole right through a person. The tall man led him past the slots confidently, though, and up to an open doorway. He stood aside and let Tycho go ahead of him.

The doorway led into a large, bare room. The walls were undecorated plaster. Tycho could see the faint outlines where windows had been boarded up and plastered over. The room was lit by two lanterns that rested on its only piece of furniture: a heavy table. Seated on the other side of the table was a man in thick robes. A loose, baglike

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leather hood covered his face. Tycho nodded to him respectfully. "Olore, Hooded."

There were three visible holes in the hood: two narrow ovals for the eyes and an even narrower slit over the mouth. Tycho saw dark eyes flicker through the ovals. The Hooded nodded to him in return and he caught the barest murmur of a whisper.

"Olore, Tychoben Arisaenn." Standing beside the Hooded, a young woman spoke his words out loud. Just as Jacerryl had said: an interpreter. Tycho caught himself thinking of Magistrate Vanyan and his self-important aide, Dorth. Unlike Dorth, the young woman at the Hooded's side seemed like nothing more than a shadow. She stood perfectly still, moving only her lips and eyes. Her hair was pulled back tight, her skin was pale, and she wore clothes of exactly the same color as the Hooded's robes. She bore a striking resemblance to the leatherworker in the cellar shop. Tycho held back a shudder and focused on the Hooded.

It wasn't so strange that the gang leader knew his name. A sharp man would know the names of many people. Tycho just hoped he didn't know too much more, especially about details of the past two days. He bowed again. "Jacerryl Dantakain sent me to you, Hooded," he said carefully, testing the waters.

The Hooded made no visible reaction, but just murmured to the young woman at his side. "I know Jacerryl Dantakain," she said for him. "We've dealt together in the past."

Simple, noncommittal. No mention of the beljurils, of course. Tycho wondered if the Hooded knew how Jacerryl had come

by them. "Jacerryl told me you were a connoisseur of exotic weapons. The other day, he showed me a pair of wide swords he bought from you. I have something I think might interest you. Your man... "

He started to twist around, but the Hooded just shook his covered head. He raised a hand—gloved in the same leather as his hood—and gestured. The tall man came forward and set Li's saber on the table before him. The Hooded folded back the wrappings carefully. When the weapon was revealed, he nodded. "A Shou dao," he said. His young interpreter delivered the words so smoothly, it was easy to forget she was there. The Hooded ran a hand along the red leather of the scabbard, wrapped it around the brass-fitted grip, and pulled the weapon out. The blade flashed bright. Li had spent as much time in polishing the saber as Tycho had in getting dressed. The Hooded looked at it—appreciatively, Tycho thought—and glanced up at the tall man. "Get Tycho a chair."

The tall man went out through another door and came back with a simple, straight-back chair that he thumped down in front of the Hooded's table. Tycho sat as the Hooded continued to examine the saber, looking at the blade, at the fittings on the hilt, at the condition of the grip. Finally, he nodded and murmured again to his interpreter. Even seated a little closer, Tycho still couldn't quite hear what he said, but the interpreter relayed, "Well used, but well taken care of. A fine weapon—and all the way from Shou Lung unless I'm wrong." She paused, the Hooded said something else, and she added, "Fifteen Sembian gold fivestars."

Tycho's eyebrows rose. "Fifteen Sembian gold would be a fine price—if you were buying a common sword from a smith in Sembia." He leaned forward. "Thirty-five."

The Hooded muttered something his interpreter didn't repeat, but Tycho could have made a good guess at what was said. The robed man considered the saber again. "This did come from farther than Sembia," he admitted. "Twenty."

"You're robbing me," Tycho said bluntly.

The Hooded looked at him and he caught a glimpse of eyes with all the warmth of ice. "This is a warrior's weapon. A good story might increase its value. Where did you get it?"

"From a Shou warrior," Tycho said. He, Veseene, and Li had worked out the best story. Tycho had been in favor of a simple tale of acquiring the weapon in the Shou-town in Telflamm. It was quick, anonymous, and all but impossible for the Hooded to contradict. Li, however, insisted on something more. Yu Mao's butterfly swords had passed through the Hooded's hands. He wanted to know how. Tycho sat back and spun out the story—remarkably close to the truth—that Li had proposed. "He came to Spandeliyon looking for revenge on Brin."

The Hooded said nothing, but he didn't have to: Tycho caught a slight shift in his posture as he leaned forward, eager for word of some misfortune befalling his rival. Tycho stretched out the tale. "Fine figure of a warrior he was, too. All the way from Shou Lung, straight through Telflamm, onto a ship, and here to Spandeliyon. Fiery temper, you could see it in his eyes."

"When?" demanded the Hooded. His interpreter spoke the word in the same monotone in which she relayed all of his speech, but Tycho caught some of his tone. He was caught in the story.

"Only a few days ago."

"What happened?"

Tycho sighed dramatically. "He never made it to Brin. Lander—you know who Lander is?—got him first. I

happened across him in his last moments. He pressed the weapon on me and begged me to see his vengeance on Brin through." He coughed. "I'm not that stupid."

"No," the Hooded said, "I can see that. Twenty-two for the dao?"

"I would consider thirty."

"Maybe. Did this angry warrior say why he wanted

vengeance on Brin?"

The Hooded was fishing for information now. Tycho held back a smile and said casually, "For the death of his brother while Brin was a pirate on a ship called Sow—."

He blinked as the Hooded stiffened sharply and gloved hands tightened around Li's saber.

It was enough. Li took a slow, deep breath and drew out the Calishite scimitar. No one reacted.

Of course, no one could see him either.

Wily old Veseene's plan had been a good one. Tycho would get himself in to see the Hooded by using the dao and an offer to sell it as bait. Talk alone wouldn't get them the beljurils, though. They needed a way to get past the Hooded's defenses and force their hand physically. They needed magical aid, something more than Tycho could provide.

And so once everything else was prepared, Veseene had brewed up her triple-strength wasp venom tea. Li had been amazed at the transformation in her as the tea took effect. While her personality had been formidable before, with her palsy temporarily suppressed Veseene stood tall and regal, wondrous and confident. And when she began to sing, it was like listening to the imperial performers

whose songs drifted over the walls of the Forbidden City in Kuo Te' Lung, except that Veseene wasn't singing for the Emperor but for him! Magic had filled her song, lending it even greater power. She had reached out and touched him—and he had vanished from sight, completely invisible.

Spent by the magic, Veseene had collapsed onto her couch. Tycho had almost cried out, but Veseene had warned them this would happen. They had left her in the care of Laera Dantakain and departed. The magic would only last so long, Veseene had said, and it only hid him from the sense of sight, not from touch or hearing. Tycho had done an excellent job of covering for him as they walked into the

Hooded's stronghold, keeping doors open long enough for him to pass through and covering up any sounds he made in climbing the stairs.

It had been a good thing that he had been behind Tycho and the tall guard on the stairs, though. As they had stepped into the Hooded's hall and he had seen the Hooded, Li had frozen. For a moment, he was back in his family's garden, this time on the occasion of his own Blessing Ceremony. ,

There had been no betrothed to present him with the tools of a man—Mother had stepped forward with a box containing the dao that was his chosen weapon—but that was tempered by the knowledge that in a month's time he would leave Keelung to take the imperial civil service examinations. A son in the service of Shou Lung was better than a good marriage.

As Father and Mother and all of the assorted relatives in attendance had returned to the house, Li drew Yu Mao aside.

"Look!" he said, thrusting the dao into his hands. Yu

Mao gave him the knowing gaze of an elder brother already used to the formalities and trappings of adulthood, but drew the dao anyway.

"Very nice," he said approvingly. He had already reached his full growth. For a silk merchant, he was a powerfully built man, tall and broad. Some day, Li thought, I'm going to be just like him.

In the end, he had ended up taller, though not so broad, and the dao of his Blessing Ceremony had been lost and replaced twice over. His father wouldn't have recognized his current dao if it had been placed before him.

'But the Hooded was tall and broad and when he drew the dao out of its scabbard, the gesture was so familiar that Li had caught his breath. And when the Hooded gasped at the mention of Sow and a murdered Shou...

Scimitar drawn, he moved closer.

His foot pressed down on a loose floorboard. A sudden squeal broke the silence of the room. Heads snapped up. The

Hooded drew a sharp breath.

Li lunged.

Veseene had said that the spell would end of its own accord. She had also said it would end if he attacked anyone. Li saw his own arms, hand, the scimitar flash into being. No need for silence now—he screamed as he slashed out at the Hooded, channeling all of his rage into the blow!

Suddenly it seemed like everyone was screaming except the Hooded—he was throwing himself back desperately. The edge of the scimitar bit deep into the surface of the table where, a heartbeat before, the Hooded had been sitting. Li wrenched the blade free and whirled around. The Hooded was backing up, dao held warily, defensively. Tycho was shouting his name. The tall guard was shouting for help—"Ambush! Ambush!"

The Hooded's young interpreter was shrieking in her own voice. She had a dagger clutched in her hand. Wild-eyed, she leaped for him. Li twisted the scimitar around—

No, she was a child! His argument wasn't with her. He twisted again, thrusting at her instead with his free hand and knocking her back. The Hooded seized the opening, though. He ducked in with a fast cut, as unfamiliar with the dao as Li was with the butterfly swords. The heavy weapon dragged his blow down. Li slapped it aside, spun the scimitar around, and raised it for a killing blow.

"Li!" Tycho's voice, terrified, cut through his concentration. He glanced back over his shoulder.

The tall guard had Tycho pinned on the ground, a sword at his throat. The man was breathing heavily. "Drop your sword," he gasped, "or your friend dies!"

Li hesitated. In that moment, the Hooded sprang back out of reach and the pounding of footsteps announced the arrival of more guards. One of them had a crossbow, cocked and aimed right at him.

They were caught.

With a shudder, Li let the scimitar fall from his fingers. He

glared at the Hooded. "You ... " he hissed in Shou.

The Hooded ignored him, scrambling to the side of his fallen interpreter. Guards surged in, grabbing Li roughly and twisting his arms up behind him. More guards dragged Tycho to his feet. The Hooded glared at both of them and snarled to his interpreter. "He says get them below and tie them down!" she relayed, the cool detachment she had shown before completely gone. Anger and fear mingled in her eyes. What the Hooded was feeling was impossible to tell. Rage welled up inside Li and he tried to throw himself at the robed man.

All it earned him were hard punches around his head and torso. The guards seized the chance to give Tycho a few blows as well. The bard tucked his head down against his chest, trying to protect himself at least a little bit. Li stood tall and straight, taking the blows and staring at the Hooded until a jab to his kidneys from the tall guard finally made him twist in pain. "Get them out of here, Cado!" spat the Hooded's interpreter.

The guards dragged them through yet another door and down a flight of stairs, though not the ones that led to the leatherworker's shop. These stairs were dank and slippery and the stink that rose up from below was foul. When they finally reached a level floor, Li could hear water. In feeble torchlight, he caught glimpses of shadowed vaults piled with crates and barrels. He and Tycho were likewise piled into a vault, one with rusty bars across its mouth. Someone produced rope, swiftly tied them hand and foot, and kicked them to the floor. Cold, damp stone slammed into his chest and chin. He tried to twist onto his back. A kick caught him high in the belly, knocking the air out of him.

For a long moment, all he could do was gasp for breath as the Hooded's guards, laughing and growling, filed out of the vault and slammed the barred door behind them. A lock clicked shut. Their voices moved away and everything was silent except for the sound of water—and Tycho's breathing.

Li twisted around and sat up. A torch outside threw dancing light into the cell.

"Tycho?" he said.

The bard was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, his face flaming red. "What in the name," he slurred softly, "of all that is good and glorious and wise and intelligent were... you... doing? " He sat up and glared at him. "We were going to take the Hooded hostage so we could get the beljurils. We weren't going to try to kill him!"

Li glared right back at him. "The Hooded is Yu Mao," he spat. Tycho's jaw dropped in disbelief. "What?" "The Hooded is Yu Mao."

Li blew out his breath and hung his head against his chest. When the anger that had gripped him in the room above ebbed a bit, he looked up again and forced the words out. "He's my brother, Tycho. When you and Jacerryl described the Hooded last night, I started to wonder. The Hooded came to Spandeliyon only a bit before Brin and just after the Sow vanished. He covered himself entirely and spoke only to an interpreter. He sold Yu Mao's swords to Jacerryl. When I saw him upstairs and from the way he froze when you mentioned the Sow, I knew—"

"Wait." Tycho shook his head as if trying to clear it and looked at Li again. "Even if you're right, even if the Hooded is Yu Mao, you just tried to kill him! I thought you only wanted to find him!"

"I do. I did." Li clenched his jaw and heat sprang into his face. "I lied to you, Tycho," he said through his teeth. "I didn't tell you the whole truth. When I saw Veseene, she guessed that, but I couldn't tell her either. I swear I didn't think it would go this far. I thought I would learn what I needed to know from Brin and that I would leave Spandeliyon to find Yu Mao somewhere else."

In the shadows, Tycho's eyes were narrow. "So," he said coldly, "what is the whole truth? Why did you just try to kill your brother?"

"Because Tieh Fa Pan didn't see Yu Mao taken hostage by the pirates of the Sow." Li swallowed. "He saw him join them. Yu Mao betrayed the expedition's ship to the pirates. Fa Pan thought that he even organized the expedition's journey to Sembia just so the pirates would have a chance to take the ship. When the pirates attacked, all the members of the expedition except Fa Pan were sent below deck for their safety. Yu Mao murdered them."

The confession burned in his gut. Tycho's eyes had gone wide and he looked like he had something to say, but Li didn't let him speak; he plunged on. "When Fa Pan went to warn them that the ship had been boarded, Yu Mao attacked him, too. He was the one who wounded Fa Pan. He pushed him overboard to drown. He didn't know that he was spirit folk, though. From the water, Fa Pan watched Yu Mao celebrating with the pirates, laughing with Brin and embracing the pirates' sorceress-captain like a lover."

His voice failed him. Silence fell. After a time, Tycho asked softly, "Why?"

Li shook his head. "I don't know. Nobody knows. Fa Pan wrote that he asked Yu Mao the same thing and all Yu Mao said was 'You wouldn't understand.' Fa Pan suspected that he murdered the rest of the expedition—and tried to kill him, too—so that word of what he had done would never get back to Keelung." He closed his eyes for a moment. "If my father hadn't received Fa Pan's letter, the silk families of Keelung would just have assumed the expedition was lost and mourned them accordingly. They might have asked questions, but not many."

"But because Fa Pan lived long enough to send that letter," Tycho said, "they sent you."

"No." Li sighed. "My father sent me, Tycho. Rather than face the shame of explaining what his eldest son had done, he told Keelung the same lie I told you. Then he sent me west to find Yu Mao and, if he wasn't already dead, to kill him."

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Tycho gasped. "Sweet chum, Li!"

"It had to be done, Tycho."

"You're talking about murdering your brother!"

"Better me than a stranger! Better me than no one at all."

He twisted so Tycho could see his left arm. "That's why my father sent the Yellow Silk with me, Tycho. It's the honor of my family; it's the tradition that binds us together. I carry the greatest treasure of the Kuang with me. That's how important this is."

"Aren't there courts in Shou Lung? Doesn't your emperor dispense justice?"

"There are courts. There is justice. There's tradition, too. All three agree. What Yu Mao did must be punished."

Tycho pressed his lips together. "Punished in secret?" Li looked away.

"If I do what I have to do," he said quietly, "I will return to Keelung and I will tell my father the truth. To everyone else, I will tell a lie. When I die, I will stand before the Lords of Karma and pray to Fa Kuan, the Immortal of justice, and Chih Shih, the Immortal of lore and tradition, to intercede on my behalf because what I did was necessary."

This time Tycho didn't answer. Silence stretched out thin.

Finally, Tycho asked, "Are you certain the Hooded is really Yu Mao?" Li nodded.

"Did he recognize your saber the way you recognized his butterfly swords?"

"It's called a dao, Tycho, not a saber," said Li. "Sabers are what the Tuigan barbarians use. And no, he couldn't have. He's never seen that particular dao before."

"Did he recognize you?"

Li hesitated. Had Yu Mao recognized him? With the hood obscuring his face, it was hard to tell anything. The moment had been so chaotic that any subtle signs would have been lost. Yu Mao certainly hadn't called out to him during their fight or after.

But I'm not some dao, new forged and plucked at random

from a rack, Li thought. I'm his brother. "How could he not have recognized me?" he demanded.

"What if he's not Yu Mao?"

"But all of the signs... "

"I know," Tycho said quickly. "I know." He sighed and tilted his head back. "But if the Hooded is Yu Mao and he was friends once with Brin, they aren't friends anymore. Brin and the Hooded despise each other."

"Maybe they've had a falling out. If Brin knows the Hooded is Yu Mao, that would explain why he's after me—his rival's brother in his hands," Li said and added in Shou, "Honest folk aren't a bandit's only prey."

"There's no honor among thieves," Tycho replied in Common.

"Li, do me a favor? Before you kill the Hooded, make sure you know who he is?"

"Kill the Hooded?" grunted a voice from outside their cell. Li twisted around sharply. The tall guard who had met Tycho in the leatherworker's shop—Cado, the Hooded's interpreter had called him—was standing on the other side of the bars. Two other guards were with him. All three had nasty looks on their face. "You go fishing with an unbaited hook, don't you?" asked Cado.

Li shot a glance at Tycho. The bard swallowed and managed a crooked grin. "Bind me," he said, "I don't even use a hook!" He squirmed up to his knees as the tall guard unlocked the cell and swung the barred door open. "Come to let us go?"

Cado answered by pulling out two smallish canvas bags. Tycho's eyes went wide. "Listen, I think there's been a misunderstanding—"

"You thought you could take the Hooded." The tall guard jerked a thumb toward Tycho then toward Li. The men with him moved forward, one grabbing Tycho and holding him still, the other pulling Li to his knees as well. Li tried to pull away, but the guard held him tight.

"Tycho!" Li said in Shou. "What's going on?"

"The Hooded isn't just called that because he wears a hood," gulped Tycho in the same language. "They call him that because his victims are usually wearing them when they're —"

Cado swatted him. "Quiet, you." He pulled a bag over his head and tugged it tight with a drawstring. Tycho gasped and struggled, but the guard just turned to Li.

"Wait!" Li said desperately. "The Hooded doesn't want us dead!"

"He does," said Cado. "He doesn't like being attacked. Wants you made an example of." He yanked the bag over Li's head. The fabric was rank and stifling. Through it, Li could see the spot of light that was the torch, but everything else was just a series of vague, dark shapes. "Then take a message to the Hooded!" he told the tall guard.

"Hooded doesn't want to hear messages."

"He'll want to hear this one," Li insisted. "Just two words. Yu Mao. He'll know what it means."

"There's a silver raven in it for you," Tycho added. "In my coat pocket. Come on—two words?"

The tall guard paused and grunted. "All right." Li heard Tycho hiss—Cado probably wasn't any too gentle in obtaining his payment. "Watch them close," he told the other two guards. Footsteps receded. Li closed his eyes and prayed to all nine Immortals that Tycho was wrong and he was right, that it was Yu Mao under that leather hood—and that even if he was going to have to kill his brother, that Yu Mao might want some kind of last word with them first.

It seemed like forever before Cado's footsteps returned. "Well?" asked Li. "Did he understand?"

"Yes," said the guard. "He said to get rid of you faster."

CHAPTER 11

On the ratty, threadbare couch, Veseene sputtered and coughed suddenly. Laera jumped up from her seat beside the fireplace and went to her. "Veseene?"

The old woman drew a dry, rasping breath. Tycho had left a

cup of water beside the couch. Laera propped Veseene up a little bit and held the cup to her lips. Veseene sipped at it and nodded. Laera took the cup away and slid a folded blanket under Veseene's head to help her stay upright.

"Are you feeling better?"

Veseene gave a shuddering sigh. "Blessed Lliira, yes." She wheezed out another cough, but shook her head when Laera reached for the water again. "I have to be feeling better," she said with a thin smile. "I couldn't feel much worse than I did before."

"Tycho said to fetch an herbalist named Sephera if you needed her."

"Don't bother Sephera." Veseene's shaking hand slipped out from under the blanket that covered her and folded around Laera's. "She'd just lecture me. I'll be fine. How long have I been asleep? What time is it?"

"It's mid-afternoon." Laera squeezed Veseene's hand. The effort it had taken the old women to cast the spell of invisibility on Li had left her incredibly weak, but somehow she had managed to hide the worst of the strong tea's effects until Tycho had left. Laera had almost run shrieking after him when Veseene had begun to moan and writhe.

Veseene hadn't let her. "It will pass," she had gasped. "It will pass!"

, And it had. Tortured twitching had faded to occasional shudders and Veseene had fallen into a restless sleep. Laera had curled up beside the small fire, staring into its luminous depths as if she could divine the future from them.

Veseene must have seen the questions she had silently asked the fire reflected in her eyes. Her grip tightened.

"You're not so certain are you, Laera?"

Laera tried to find words and failed. She looked down at the worn floor and shook her head. Veseene released her hand, reaching up to bump her chin and nudge it back up. "Never look away, Laera. You have beautiful eyes. Looking away hides them when you should be using them to your

advantage." Her hand fell back to the blankets, but her faded blue eyes remained on Laera's. "Why do you want to leave Spandeliyon, Laera? Why do you want to leave an easy life to become a wanderer?"

"I—" Laera started to look down again. She bit her lip and forced herself to look up. She did sink back, though, folding her legs to sit cross-legged, a pose Uncle Jacerryl had once told her was most unbecoming to a young lady of quality. Of course now Uncle Jacerryl was revealed for a thief and a smuggler—and she might not be a young lady of quality much longer. She sighed. "I wanted to leave so that I could be with Tycho. Because I thought he felt something for me." She crinkled her nose. "Now I know he doesn't."

"Don't be too hard on him," Veseene cautioned her with a smile. "He wasn't being very sensitive, but he was just flirting. I know it wasn't meant maliciously. Playing to the audience—any audience—is just second nature to a bard." Her eyes twinkled. "If you were giving lessons to a handsome young man, don't you think you'd flirt with him? Just a little bit?" Laera stared at her in shock.

"No!" she said firmly, but part of her rejected that answer almost immediately. She thought about the pose in which she had arranged herself for Tycho in the library and felt color rise to her cheeks. "Well, maybe," she confessed. "But I wouldn't want to hurt anyone!"

"Neither would Tycho." The old woman sat up a little more. "But even after you found out Tycho didn't feel for you that way, you still said you wanted to take to the road. Did you really think about why or is it as Tycho says and you're just being stubborn?" The flush of Laera's cheeks grew stronger. Veseene gave her an easy smile. "It's all right, Laera. It's not my place to force you to go back home."

"Home!" Laera snorted. "Home to let my father lock me in my room?" She stood up. "He would, you know. He'd lock me up and not let me out until I was married to some ugly

merchant from Impiltur or Thesk. He probably wouldn't even let me out for the wedding—he'd bring a priest to the house to hear my vows through a locked door!"

Veseene laughed. Laera glared at her. "He would!" she insisted.

"From what I've heard about him from Tycho, I don't doubt it." Veseene wiped her eyes. She shifted her legs and patted the couch. Laera sat down beside her. "Why a bard, Laera?" she asked.

Laera sighed. "Wandering from city to city, needing nothing more than an instrument, a sharp blade, and a sharper wit, living off stories, songs, and secrets..." She smiled. "I read a book once that told the deeds of the Harpers—fighting evil and defending the weak then vanishing like music in the night." She crooked her head to look at Veseene. "Have you ever known any Harp—"

"No," said Veseene in a tone that was both quick and sharp. "I haven't. Did your book point out that Harpers are also meddlers? Thanks to them, there are places all through the north and west that would welcome an honest night's entertainment, but never see it because anyone who wanders in singing so much as a note is immediately clapped in irons by the local authorities, kept overnight, then run out of town in the morning." She crossed her arms. "Lliira's song, Laera, Tycho said you had been reading too many romances and listening to ballads, but have you ever really thought about what life on the road is like? You can make your way with a song and a smile, but it's brutally hard and a sharp wit can be as much trouble as a sword. Ask Tycho about that! A bard's life might sometimes be more exciting than life as a dutiful daughter or a merchant's wife, but it's seldom any easier and there's very little romantic about it!"

Tears welled up in Laera's eyes and no matter how rapidly she blinked, they wouldn't go away. Veseene turned wet and blurry. Laera wiped the back of a hand across her face.

"Veseene! I thought you were on my side!"

"I'm on the side that doesn't want to see you make a stupid decision, Laera." The old woman put a trembling, feather-light arm around her and held her close. "I wouldn't trade my life for any other. I love performing. I love the people I've met and the places—all of them— I've been. I love the magic that I found along the way. But a bard's life can be ugly and confusing. You saw just a little bit of that last night." Her hand stroked Laera's hair. "Forget Tycho. Forget your father. Forget me. You need to ask yourself one thing: if you could somehow turn back the hours to yesterday afternoon, would you leave your father's house again?"

Laera gulped and stared in silence at the fire. Veseene continued to hold her and stroke her hair. After a little while, she began to speak.

"A good many years ago," she said, "not too long before I came to Spandeliyon for the first time and met Tycho in fact, I was in Two Stars, about as far east in Thesk as you can go before you're in Rashemen. Now, Two Stars was then and is now ruled by a family called Gallidy. While I was there, I made the acquaintance of a younger son of the Gallidys and he invited me to stay in his family's castle—",

"A castle and a prince?" Laera couldn't hold back a smile. "I thought you said a bard's life wasn't easy or romantic?"

Veseene only gave her a disapproving glance. "He invited me to stay in his family's castle, which is positioned precisely astride the crossroads of the Golden Way leading east and west and the Cold Road leading north and south. I wasn't the only guest in the castle, of course. There was also a Red Wizard of Thay, a group of elves, and, most important, a party of Nars, the rough folk who dwell at the north end of the Cold Road. As it happened, there was a young Nar man among them, the son of a chief, who was of an age with my host. The Nar's name was Eiter, my host's Dain, and while I was there, they grew very close and

became fast friends."

"When the season drew to a close and it was time for the Nars to leave, Dain and Eiter and I went on one last carousing binge around Two Stars—"

Laera twisted around and stared at her. "Veseene! How old were you?"

"I haven't always been a shaking invalid," the bard said haughtily, "and even a lady of quality should never ask a wo'man her age. Let's say I was young at heart, but old enough to know better."

"Late that night, when both Dain and Eiter had fallen well into their cups, they decided that they needed to seal their friendship. With me as a witness, they cut each other's right palm and pressed their wounds together, mingling their blood and binding them in a Nar blood-oath. The next day, the Nars left."

"On their way north, brigands attacked them. With his right hand wounded, Eiter couldn't fight properly. He was killed."

Laera gasped, but Veseene continued her story. "Eiter's father sent word back to Two Stars—and a demand for restitution. Blood for blood. Dain was responsible for the wound that killed Eiter."

"That's not right!" choked Laera. Veseene's eyebrow rose.

"Isn't it? If Dain hadn't cut Eiter's palm, he would have been able to fight and he would have survived the attack."

"What happened?" Laera begged. "What did the Gal-lidysdo?"

"Dain and his family could have ignored the demand, but that would have strained relations with the Nars and drawn their integrity into question. They could have tried to make restitution with coin, but that would have made a mockery of Dain's oath to Eiter. In the end, Dain saddled a horse and rode north alone along the Cold Road to meet the Nar chief. His oath to Eiter would accept no less."

Laera sighed. "That's heroic!" she said. "It's just like what would happen in a ballad!"

"Oh?" Veseene asked. "Then how would the story end in a ballad?"

She thought for a moment and frowned. "Dain found the bandits on the way north, slew Eiter's real killer, and took his body to... No." Her frown grew deeper as she thought a little more. Veseene wouldn't be asking if the ending were so simple. Laera tried to imagine how the tale would fit into a ballad, tried to imagine Tycho singing or reciting it. She began again. "Dain reached the Nar chief and showed him the scar on his palm. When the chief saw how deeply Dain had loved Eiter, he declared that blood for blood had been satisfied—and Dain took Eiter's place as his son. He lived, but never saw Two Stars again." She looked at Veseene.

The old woman nodded. "That would make a good ballad," she said. "It's actually very close. Dain did show Eiter's father his scarred palm." Laera smiled—until Veseene added, "And because he had taken the blood-oath with Eiter, Dain was considered a member of the tribe and no tribe member could take the life of another, even in revenge. But there was a punishment for murder. Some merchants found Dain a tenday later, staggering south along the Cold Road. The Nar punishment for murder is exile—and disfigurement. The Nars had hacked off Dain's

left hand, the hand that inflicted the wound that killed Eiter, and branded their sign for death on his cheek."

Laera shrank back in stunned shock, pulling away from Veseene's arms. "No! You made that up!" Veseene shrugged. "Why would I?" She reached for Laera's hand. Suddenly her frail, trembling grip seemed cold and clawlike. Laera swallowed. Veseene shook her head. "Laera, life is no romance. Every decision you make has a consequence. If Dain and Eiter hadn't taken a blood-oath ... if Dain hadn't gone north... " She patted Laera's hand. "Think carefully before you decide to leave your father's house for—"

Abruptly, there was a shout out in the street. A heartbeat later, the slam of the building's door echoed up the stairwell

outside Tycho and Veseene's rooms. Laera jumped up. "Tycho?"

Heavy footfalls hit the stairs. Veseene flinched. "No," she said, "it isn't!" She pointed sharply. "Laera, hide in the back room." Laera blinked and stared. "Do it now!" Veseene snapped.

Laera turned and darted for the door to the dark second room. She caught a glimpse of Veseene grabbing the linen bag that held her special tea and stuffing it into her shirt, and then the door was closed behind her. She leaned against it.

The footfalls on the stairs were thunder. They stopped—and a splintering crash seemed to shake the entire building. Veseene shrieked, gasped, and choked, "You—!"

"Olore again, Veseene." Laera recognized that rich, warm voice. Brin! Her breath stopped. The door she leaned against wouldn't stop him—or whoever was with

him. The footsteps on the stairs had been too heavy for just a halfling. She could feel a blade on her throat again. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape, a hiding place.

The window. Tycho had left his rope tied to the bedpost; she had pulled it up and coiled it neatly after he and an invisible Li had climbed down. As massive footsteps moved in the outer room, she ran for it and heaved the heavy coil out. It slapped against the side of the building.

"The back room!" snapped Brin and the footsteps moved faster. Laera twisted her body over the windowsill, wrapped her hands around the rope, and let herself drop.

The rough fibers burned her palms and fingers like grabbing hold of a blazing torch. She hit the ground before she could cry out, though, and new agony flared through her right ankle. She slammed down into the melting snow and icy muck of the alley just as a door slammed open in the room above.

There were shadows. A crooked niche where this building

and its neighbor came together. Ignoring the pain in her palms and ankle, Laera scrambled for the niche and jammed herself into it. She choked her whiin-pers into silence. Distantly, she heard footsteps and a grunt of frustration from up above. A moment later, there was a slither of rope on wood. Tycho's rope being pulled up again? Being dropped into the alley? She didn't dare to look. Above her, the footsteps moved away. Voices, too indistinct to make out—until Veseene shrieked again. And stopped.

Laera squeezed herself into a tiny, trembling knot.

Word that there were mages holed up at the Eel must have gotten around, Lander thought. Mid-afternoon and the festhall was barely half as full as usual. Just the whiff of serious magery was enough to keep most folk away and to set those who did come in on edge with suspicion. And Lander, by virtue of being the mages' keeper, had become suspect, too. Customers gave him a wide berth as he walked carefully across the floor of the Eel and back once more to the Blue Room, a foaming tankard of ale in one hand, a tiny eggcup-sized glass of strong Chessentan wine in the other.

Mosi Anu and Hanibaz Nassor didn't even look up as he nudged the door open. They had stopped looking up some time ago. Mosi was deep in reading a scroll; the tiny glass of wine his first indulgence in Brin's invitation to take advantage of the Eel's facilities. Hanibaz, on the other hand, had indulged freely. The ale Lander carried was his fourth, the skeletal remains of a whole roast chicken lay picked clean in front of him, and not so long ago Lander had been obliged to summon one of the women who worked in the festhall's pleasure rooms to administer a Mulhorandi massage to the hefty mage. Hanibaz slouched in his chair like a great rotund cat: feet propped up on a second chair, relaxed, half-asleep, and reeking of warm, exotic oils. Lander set the fresh ale beside him and the wine beside Mosi and quickly turned to go.

He wasn't quite quick enough. "When will Brin return with

the Yellow Silk?" asked Mosi. He didn't look up from his scroll.

"Soon," Lander responded, adding silently, / hope! "My patience grows thin."

"You grow thin, Mosi," said Hanibaz. The big man stirred himself and sat up. "Have something to eat. Or try a massage. Or take some ale instead of that vile wine." He groped for his tankard and raised it to his rival. "That will put hair on your chest!"

"I don't want hair on my chest, you hirsute ogre."

Lander looked from one wizard to the other and tried to back out of the room as discretely as he could. Hanibaz's eyes caught him first, however. "Friend Lander, a question for you. Is what Brin told us of the Yellow Silk of Kuang true?"

No spell that Lander could sense backed up the question or demanded a truthful answer. It was better not to try cheating a mage, though, a Red Wizard especially. "What I know of it is," he said carefully. "Last night I saw bolts of bright light that exploded with enough heat to melt snow and set wood smoldering. I think I caught a glimpse of a man I'd swear was no mage hurling them."

"And yet Brin knows all about the Silk," murmured Hanibaz.

"Or claims to." Mosi set his scroll aside. Lander expected it to snap back into a curl, but the roll of parchment stayed open as if held by invisible hands. Mosi turned a piercing gaze on him. "How does a one-eyed hin, a former pirate, learn so much about such an exotic artifact? Brin strikes me as an unlikely student of eastern mageries."

"Especially considering," added Hanibaz thoughtfully, "that according to his own story, the Yellow Silk has been something of a well-guarded secret for centuries."

Lander swallowed. "I don't know," he answered. "I hadn't even heard him mention it until last night and I only heard its story when Brin told it to you." He took a quick step toward the door and groped behind his back for the handle.

"I'll ask him for you when he returns!"

His fingers found the handle. He twisted it and ducked through the door before the wizards could ask anything else, all but slamming it behind him. Every eye in the Eel turned to stare at him. Lander glared back and gave a growl. "Mind your own lines, gutgrinders!" He stalked over to the bar and slapped his hand down. The bartender put a mug of ale in front of him quickly.

A door opened and he caught the squealing of pigs. Grabbing his mug, Lander hurried to the back of the festhall. Brin was just pulling closed the curtains of the gambling room. "Nobody goes in there," he said.

"Hanibaz and Mosi are getting impatient. Do you have the Yellow Silk?"

Brin pulled him out through the back door and into the pigsty. Black Scratch looked up from kicking at straw and snorted at Lander. The thug glowered back at him. "They'll just have to wait a little longer," said Brin. He grabbed Lander's mug out of his hand and gulped at it as he walked across the sty to jump up on his table. "Everything's taken care of. Everything's in motion."

"Everything?" Lander gave Brin a cautious look. "What everything?"

"Don't think about it. The Yellow Silk will be coming to us." He drained the mug and thumped it down on the tabletop. "I sent the man I left watching the building in Bakers Way off to find your men and as many others as he can gather up."

"Who's watching Tycho's rooms, then?"

Brin smiled. "They don't need watching anymore. I told you, everything's in motion. The only thing I need you to do is clear out the Eel once the men get here." Lander hissed in surprise. Brin shrugged. "Don't worry, we'll be open again before the moon comes up."

"You're expecting a fight."

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"Bitch Queen's mercy, I hope so." The halfling's smile turned savage.

The door to the Eel swung open. Jacerryl Dantakain stood framed in the doorway, leaning on it for support. He looked bad. His usually well-dressed hair looked like it had been combed into position with his fingers, his clothes were streaked with muck, and his face was marked with some very colorful bruises. When he pushed himself off the door frame, he staggered. "Brin!" he gasped. "We need to talk!" Lander started forward, but Brin grabbed his arm and gave a quick shake of his head. "Just go close the door," he said. Lander blinked, but nodded. As he pushed past Jacerryl, he could smell wine even over the stink of the sty. The man's stagger wasn't due to any injury.

"What is it, Jacerryl?" Brin asked mildly. Jacerryl wobbled a little closer to him.

"It's Tycho," he said. "He's gone bad—him and that Shou friend of his. They attacked me!"

"Why would they do that?"

"It's your beljurils. I heard that Tycho tried to cheat you out of them yesterday but that you gave him time to give them back. The next thing I knew, though, I heard from a friend that he was putting out word that / had stolen the beljurils!"

Last night at the Ease, Tycho had said something about Jacerryl, but Brin had been so intent on Li Chien... Lander caught Brin's gaze. The halfling's eye just narrowed and he shook his head at him. To Jacerryl, he said, "Did you?"

"On Tyr's holy balance, no!" Jacerryl gave a shiver. "You know I'd never cheat you, Brin! As soon as I heard what Tycho was saying, I went out looking for him."

"And you found him."

Jacerryl nodded enthusiastically. "Bind me, I found him! I confronted him but he had his Shou beat me up!"

"Did he have his Shou get you drunk, too?"

Jacerryl gaped and whined in protest, but Brin just gave him a hard snarl. Jacerryl shut his mouth. Brin glared at him. "It takes a brave man to come to me just to claim innocence. Why not go to your brother?"

"If I went to Mard, I'd have to tell him why I'd gone looking for Tycho in the first place. He'd have thrown me out of his house if he didn't throw me into a guard station jail!"

"So you went and drank until you decided it was better to come to me."

Jacerryl shook his head. "Just one glass, Brin! Just one! It's not like you're an easy man to talk to!" A grasping edge of desperation crept into his voice. "I know what Tycho did with the beljurils—what he was going to do anyway. I heard him and the Shou talking about it."

"That was clumsy of them." Brin put his elbow on his knee and rested his chin in the palm of his hand. His eye was a hard black gem focused on Jacerryl. The man swallowed.

"They thought I was unconscious," he said quickly. He held out his hands. "Sweet truth, Brin! Don't you believe me?"

Brin stared at him. "I believe you're a piss-desperate liar who has worked himself so far down a dragon's throat that he actually thinks he can get out by going all the way through to the other end."

He flicked a finger.

Lander choked and scrambled for the fence around the sty. Jacerryl, too drunk and scared to think, didn't have a chance. Black Scratch let out a bellow. Hooves churning snow and muck, the boar charged. Jacerryl

managed to scream as the animal's tusks ripped through clothes and flesh, tearing into skin and muscle. Blood splattered the snow. Brin's other pigs squealed in excitement at the mayhem.

A second toss of Black Scratch's bristly head opened a gash from hip to chest. Lander heard the cracking of bone even over the squeals and bellows. A third toss caught... something ... and Jacerryl was lifted up into the air, shrieking terribly. Black Scratch twisted and shook. Jacerryl came flying free and rolled across the sty to crash into the fence right in front of Lander. Splintered ribs poked free of his wounds. Ruined organs spilled bile and foul juices. A

choking cough shook him and bloody froth sprayed out of his mouth. Brin leaped down off the table and shoved past Black Scratch. Jacerryl's eyes rolled toward him.

Brin pulled out a dagger, spun it around his fingers once, and plunged it straight into the man's heart. Jacerryl spasmed—and died. The halfling whipped the dagger free. Black Scratch snorted and snuffled at the corpse, and turned away to chase back the other pigs.

Lander stared at the savaged body for a moment then looked up at Brin. "He could have told us where the beljurils are." Brin shrugged and wiped his dagger on the dead man's clothes.

"Doesn't matter. Tycho will know, too. He'll tell us." The dagger went into Brin's belt. He stared at Jacerryl's body as well, but when he glanced up, there was a wicked grin of inspiration on his face. "Take him over to Tycho's rooms and dump him there."

Lander grimaced. "What about Veseene?"

"Don't worry," said Brin. "She's not there."

Something in the way he said it sent a shiver up Lander's back. The wheelbarrow he had used to muck out the sty the day before was leaned up against the side of the pig shelter. He rolled it over. An old blanket hung beside the shelter as well; Lander wrapped it around Jacerryl's body and managed to get him into the wheelbarrow without getting too much blood and filth on himself. Brin watched, one hand idly rubbing at Black Scratch's neck. "Hurry back," he said. "Things are moving."

Lander nodded and trundled the wheelbarrow off through the alley. He was halfway to Bakers Way when people began shouting and pointing. He looked up.

A thin column of smoke, growing thicker and darker as he watched, stained the sky. It was roughly in the area of the Wench's Ease.

Things are moving. Wheelbarrow rattling, Lander picked up his pace.

The Hooded's men chuckled. The one standing beside Tycho hauled him to his feet, bent down, and heaved him over his shoulder like a sack of grain. Blood went rushing to his head. The bard protested, but it did no good. Li was yelling, too, and he could hear the Shou struggling. It sounded like it was taking both the third guard and tall Cado to restrain him. Tycho tried to squirm out of his captor's grasp. The man just gave a sharp bounce that slapped Tycho's gut hard against his shoulder. Tycho groaned. The sound of a punch was followed by a similar groan from Li. "Let's go," said Cado.

They began to move. Tycho could tell from the echoes of their footsteps when they stepped out of the cell. He could also tell from the way the other two men grunted that they must be carrying Li between them. The man carrying him laughed.

"Guess I got lucky with the small fish!" He gave a few more bounces—apparently just because he could. Tycho groaned with each one. "I don't know, though. I guess he's so small the only thing we can do is throw him back!"

That got a strained laugh out of the other men. The sound of water that had filled the vaults was getting louder. Tycho's stomach twisted. He had only managed to tell Li half of the tale about the Hooded's victims. They were found wearing hoods, yes, but they were also found floating offshore, drowned. How they got there was a mystery. Tycho could guess now, though. The Hooded's deep cellar held some kind of underground stream or borehole to the ocean. He offered a desperate prayer to Tymora, the goddess of luck—because they were going to need a lot of it—and shuddered. His captor must have mistaken it for more struggles, because he gave an especially hard bounce.

Tycho's hood slid around on his head. The ends of the drawstring that pulled it tight dropped right beneath his chin.

Chance or actual divine favor, Tycho didn't care. Thank you,

blessed Tymora! He dug his chin down against his chest, wiggling until he got it between the ends of the string and under the fabric of the hood then thrust out sharply.

The hood loosened around his neck. Tycho shook his head frantically back and forth.

"Bind me!" his captor spat. "I think the little fish is trying to bite my butt!" He gave him a jostle, but Tycho just kept shaking his head, trying to get the hood to loosen more. It fell over his chin and into his mouth—he spit it out and shook hard. His captor growled in annoyance. "Hey! Cado! Give this fish a swat!"

He spun around just as Tycho gave one last hard shake.

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The hood fell off. Tycho twisted his head and found himself staring—upside down—at Cado. "Hey, you!" the bard snarled desperately. He fixed his eyes on the tall man's. "While you were gone, we made a deal with your friends. They're going to let us go and dump you in the water!" He focused his will and poured magic into a burst of song. "Believe me—they're going to betray you!"

For less than a heartbeat, Cado's expression went slack then —

"Shar damn you both!" He dropped Li, leaving the other guard staggering under the Shou's weight, and took a sharp step away.

Tycho's captor spun back around to face him and Cado whirled out of his field of vision. Tycho craned his neck, trying to get a look around. They were in another low, vaulted chamber. The sound of water was very close. He twisted the other way and caught a glimpse of a pool of dark water, roiling with unseen currents. The Hooded's passage to the ocean. His stomach twisted again at how close they had come to it!

"He's lying, Cado," the man holding Li was saying. He grunted, and there was a thud and a groan as Li hit the stone floor. "We didn't even talk to them—"

Cado just snarled back, "You're a stinking piece of chum, Ledek!"

Metal scraped on leather—a knife being drawn. "Hold on there, Cado!" gasped Tycho's captor. He shrugged and suddenly Tycho was rolling off his shoulder. He landed on his side and pain screamed through his shoulder. For a moment, all he could do was lie there, gasping and watching as Cado circled the other men. The tall guard had a knife in his hand, held low and ready to strike. He stepped slowly, warily.

"You've always had it in for me, haven't you, Vencil? You were jealous because the Hooded favored me. You wanted to move up. And you, Ledek—I've seen you hanging around my stash." Ledek's eyes narrowed and darted off toward one of the vaults. Cado snarled. "I knew it!" Ledek drew a sharp breath, stepping over Li's fallen form and into an area of unobstructed footing.

Li must have sensed that he was clear. He twisted and started rolling away from the conflict—and straight toward the roiling pool! Tycho choked. "Li, stop! Stop!"

The Shou froze just in time, only inches away from the water's edge. Unfortunately, Tycho's warning brought Ledek and Vencil's attention back to their prisoners. "Bind me," hissed Ledek, "it's a trick! Cado, it's all some kind of trick!" He turned to grab—or push!—Li.

"Sweet chum right, it's a trick!" Cado growled. "One I'm not falling for!" He lunged at Ledek's exposed back and Ledek yelled as the knife sank into his shoulder. With a gasp, Vencil leaped for Cado.

Tycho stretched out his legs, tangling Vencil's feet. The man went down hard—and took an even harder blow as Cado, whipping his knife out of Ledek's shoulder, jumped back and stomped down hard on his hand. Vencil howled and clutched the injured hand close. His good hand snapped up and latched onto Cado's belt, pulling him off his feet. Cado twisted and stabbed as he fell.

Beyond the two struggling men, Ledek was staggering

unsteadily. "Li!" shouted Tycho. "Roll toward me now!"

Li spun his body around and right into the back of Ledek's legs. With a startled yell, the Hooded's man toppled back. He almost caught himself and for a moment his arms flailed through the air as he fought for balance—and lost.

He splashed back into the dark pool. His last scream was choked off as the current sucked him under.

Cado reared up, whirled around at the noise, and looked down. Vencil lay still beneath him, Cado's knife buried in the side of his chest. Confusion washed across the tall man's face. "Bloody—"

Tycho sang magic at him. Light, sharp and bright, flashed briefly in front of his eyes. Cado reeled back, stumbling over Li's still-rolling body. Guided by the brief moment of contact, Li gave a tremendous shout, drew back his legs, and kicked hard. His feet took Cado square in the backside and sent him slamming headfirst into the stone wall of the vault. He hit with a meaty thud and slid down to sprawl limply on the floor. Li struggled to his knees, panting, hood still in place, but poised to attack anyone who came near. Tycho drew a deep breath. "Li," he said, "it's over."

"There's one more," snarled Li.

"Cado did him." Tycho got himself up onto his knees and shuffled over to Vencil's body. He plopped himself where he could grab the hilt of Cado's knife with his bound hands. It made a wet, sucking sound as it slid free. "Come here and hold out your hands."

It was tricky work, cutting rope that neither of them could see with a knife that was slippery with blood. He managed to do it without nicking either himself or Li more than twice. Hands free, Li immediately ripped off his hood and stared around. His eyes settled on the water of the pool. His mouth opened and, for a moment, no sound came out. Then he gasped, "How close did I come to that?"

"You almost went where Ledek did." Tycho let the knife clatter from his fingers and twisted around. "My turn."

Li cut the rope around his wrists and the bonds on their ankles. Tycho stretched gratefully and swung the shoulder on which he had fallen in gentle arcs. The joint protested, but not badly. He climbed to his feet and checked on Cado. "Unconscious, but not dead." He dug through the tall man's pockets and reclaimed his silver coin. Li, however, took a second knife from Vencil's body and looked in the direction of the stairs. Tycho followed his gaze. "The Hooded," he said.

"Yu Mao," said Li. "Do you still doubt it? Do you still think I'm wrong in what I have to do? He knew who I was and he tried to kill us anyway."

Tycho hesitated. "No," he said finally. "I don't doubt it." He held out his hand and Li gave him one of the knives—the smaller of the two. Tycho closed his fist around the handle. "But before you kill him, I want to get Brin's beljurils. You may not need to talk to him anymore, but I still need to buy him off!"

"He may want to reward you for killing his rival."

"That's not the sort of thing I want a reward for."

They bound Cado, gagged him with a strip of cloth, and tucked him away in the darkest corner they could find. Vencil's body they dumped into the pool—Li shuddered as he saw the speed with which the water seized it and took it away. With the obvious signs of their struggle gone, someone would need to look closely to find Vencil's blood on the shadowed floor. There was no one else in the cellar, but there was also no guarantee that there was only one way in and they didn't need anyone raising an alarm.

Li led the way up the stairs, creeping slowly, knife at the ready. Both of them were alert for anyone coming down from above. No one did. Just before they reached the top, Tycho touched Li's leg. "Let me go first," he whispered. "If there are more of the Hooded's men in there, I

can take them down with a spell. I might even be able to catch Yu Mao." Li frowned. Tycho shook his head. "It won't

hurt them," he reassured him. Li's frown didn't lighten, but he stood aside. Tycho squeezed past and climbed to the top of the stairs. Putting one hand on the door handle, he held the other up to Li, three fingers extended.

He folded the first finger and his hand tightened on the handle.

He folded the second and drew a deep breath.

He folded the third, ripped open the door, and stepped through, spell on his tongue.

The Hooded's hall was empty.

"Bind me!" he hissed as Li came bounding in after him. He darted over and checked the gang boss's table. Its top was clear, though the stroke of Li's scimitar cut a light line across the wood, and there were no drawers underneath. Other than the table and its matching chair, the room was empty.

"Three other doors," said Li quietly. He pointed at one. "The leatherworker's shop."

Tycho pointed as well. "Cado brought me a chair from that one. It's probably a storeroom." ,

"Or a private room."

Tycho's finger paused and swung to the third door. "That one? Which way did the Hooded's men come from before?"

Li shook his head. Tycho hissed. "All right." He strode up to the third door and opened it.

Gathered around a table, talis cards in their hands, three men looked up in surprise. One of them dropped his cards and grabbed for a cocked crossbow.

Tycho choked and slammed the door shut. An instant later, there was a sharp thunk against the other side. He whipped the door open again. Exactly at head height, a

crossbow bolt quivered in the wood. The men were on their feet, cards forgotten in favor of daggers and swords. Tycho swirled his hand through the air and sang out a spell, powerful yet at the same time as soft and gentle as a breeze. First one man, then another, and finally the third, staggered and slid to the ground in deep slumber.

Li looked in past Tycho and nodded in impressed approval. He pointed at a fallen sword with a questioning look. "Go ahead," Tycho told him. "They won't wake up." He stepped into the room himself and looked around. Table, bench, a bed—and no other way out. He cursed.

"The other door," said Li. He picked up the sword and took a second and offered it to Tycho. The bard shook his head. Li shrugged and put the weapon back down. "How long will they sleep?"

"Not long." Tycho led Li back out into the hall and closed the door. He took the Hooded's chair and wedged it under the handle. "That should hold them long enough if they wake up too soon."

"Can you cast that spell again?"

"If I need to."

They opened the final door more cautiously. There were chairs—the one Cado had produced for Tycho and two others like it—set just beyond, but there was also another flight of stairs, this time going up. They ended in another door.

Li wrinkled his nose and said, "I smell incense and pipeweed."

Tycho nodded and led the way once more. This time, however, he listened closely at the door. He could hear murmuring on the other side—but only one voice. No, there were two, but one was very faint. The Hooded and his young interpreter. Tycho caught Li's eye and counted down on his fingers again. One. Two. Three.

The upper door swung open to a room draped in silks and rich hangings, lit by softly glowing magical lanterns, and strewn with thick carpets and cushions. In the midst of this luxury, the Hooded and his interpreter scrambled to their feet. The Hooded—his robes set aside to reveal a simple tunic and trousers, but the leather hood still draped over his head—leaped for a rack of swords. His interpreter, however, reached no farther than her belt, snatching out a knife and sending it flickering at Tycho.

He threw himself into a roll and the knife soared above his head, though Li, plunging through the doorway, was very nearly not so lucky. He jerked back as the bright metal flashed just in front of his chest. "Mother to dogs!" he snarled in Shou. The Hooded's interpreter reached back to her belt.

"Hey!" shouted Tycho. He grabbed a cushion and flung it at her. She batted it aside, but the distraction was enough for Li to get through the door. He hurled himself at the Hooded with a shout.

"Yu Mao!"

The Hooded had a sword off the rack and came spinning around just in time to meet Li's blow. Metal clanged on metal. Li struck again, driving the Hooded back with a flurry of attacks. The Hooded's sword worked desperately; the gang boss was trying to get in some kind of counterstrike, but the blows Li was doling out were fierce and angry. The Hooded was forced into a desperate and constant defense. His interpreter shrieked and turned to her master, but Tycho leaped into her and slammed her to the ground. Howling, she raked at him with her fingers. "Stop that!"

he spat sharply. He grabbed her wrists and shoved them back over her head until he could pin them against the floor. She just snapped up at him with her teeth as he bent over her, forcing him to arc away or be bitten. He cursed, shifted her wrists so he could hold them with one hand and groped with the other for a piece of silk hanging from the wall. It tore free in an enormous sheet. Tycho cursed again, and tried wrapping the fabric around the young woman's hands and wrists. Anything to restrain this wildcat!

Every time he shifted his attention to her hands, she kicked. Every time he tried to pin her legs, she thrashed. The whole time she was howling and snapping. Teeth finally found his arm. Tycho yelped at the sudden pain and flung himself off of her. She twisted after him, but he pointed a hand at her and sang a sharp note.

Magic flowed, quick and dirty, and she staggered in a momentary daze. Tycho snatched up the long silk and wrapped it around her entire torso, pinning her arms against her sides and twisting the fabric sheath tight before she could recover. When she opened her mouth to let out another feral shriek, he jammed a trailing edge of the silk into it. "Bind me," he gasped, "what gutter did you crawl out of?" He kicked her feet out from under her and knocked her to the floor.

Across the room, the Hooded flinched at his interpreter's fall. His defense faltered for just a moment. Li drove his blade in. The Hooded twisted and the sharp metal sliced across his side. His foot shifted. He kicked up a cushion at Li. The Shou caught it with his sword. Fabric split and a storm of feathers exploded out. The Hooded gave a strange, muted cry and thrust his sword into the downy cloud.

Li spun out on the other side, sweeping his blade down. It hit hard just above the hilt of the Hooded's sword with a clear, sharp ring and slapped the weapon from his grasp. Li's sword flicked back to the other man's chest. The Hooded froze.

But so did Li. His face twisted. His eyes were fixed on the Hooded's masked face as if they were the only two people in the room—in the world.

Tycho stared at him. "Li?" he asked cautiously.

"Li?"

Memories played through Li's mind. Memories of his father's face as he showed him the letter from Tieh Fa Pan. Memories of the drawn faces of the silk families of Keelung as they mourned sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers lost in the lands of the west—with no idea of the truth behind that loss. Memories of the shame and righteous anger that had driven him the length of the Golden Way, of the stabbing agony of Cado's words in the cellar. He said get rid of you faster. >

... Memories of watching Yu Mao on the day of his Blessing

Ceremony, of playing with him in the garden, of lessons together, of trapping frogs and fireflies before the heir of Kuang grew too dignified for such things— You're talking about murdering your brother, Tycho had said and he had insisted, Better me than a stranger; better me than no one at all. Courts, justice, tradition all agreed—but, in the end, his heart did not.

"I can't do it," Li hissed finally in Shou. His blade trembled. "Do you hear that, Yu Mao? I have ached for this halfway across the world and now..." Yu Mao said nothing, just stayed stone still. "Tycho," breathed Li. "Take off his hood."

The bard stepped away from the writhing form of Yu Mao's young woman, moved next to Yu Mao cautiously, and reached up and pulled off the leather hood.

Breath caught in Li's throat. Memories, love, and conflict all suddenly collapsed, shriveling like paper in a flame.

Round Western eyes. Thin, gold-brown hair. Pale skin. The man before him was not Yu Mao.

Li's arms and legs shook. His shoulders tensed. The muscles of his belly heaved and knotted. A voice—his— rasped in hollow agony.

The Hooded moved suddenly, grabbing at his sword arm and thrusting him away. An elbow lashed back and caught Tycho in the jaw. The bard cried out and staggered. Li barely noticed.

Not Yu Mao.

With a wild roar, he dropped his sword and grabbed the Hooded with his bare hands. Fingers knotted in the Westerner's tunic and pulled him close—Li snapped his head forward, smashing his forehead against the Hooded's. The Hooded swayed. Li lifted him off his feet and slammed him back into the nearest wall. "Where is my brother?" he howled. "Where is Yu Mao?" He clamped a hand tight around the Hooded's throat to hold him upright while he drove the other into his belly.

Tycho was like a mosquito hovering on the edge of his awareness, his voice an annoying whine. Li shrugged him aside and hammered his fist into the Hooded's belly again. The mosquito gasped and its whine changed to song. Light flashed suddenly between him and the Hooded. Li threw up his arm to shield his eyes and staggered back.

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Hands grabbed him and gave him a sharp slap across the face.

"Li!" yelled Tycho. "Li, look at me!" Another stinging slap. "Look at me!"

Li blinked and focused. Tycho was hanging onto his shirt front. His face was white. The room was silent. Even the Hooded's interpreter had stopped her struggling. Li looked beyond Tycho.

The unmasked Hooded slumped motionless against the wall. Blood was trickling down from a cut on his forehead. Li swallowed hard. His anger ebbed a little and he glanced up at Tycho. He wasn't sure what he intended to say, but what came out was, "He's not Yu Mao."

"No," Tycho agreed. "He's not. Another couple of punches, though, and you might have killed him anyway."

Li's stomach lurched. "I wasn't going to. When I thought he was Yu Mao----"

"I know," said Tycho. "I could tell. Let's see who he really is."

He let go of Li's shirt, went to the unconscious man, and pushed his head back against the wall. The pale face that turned up—eyes lolling half-open, mouth slack—was a ruin. And not from Li's fists. Scars marked his face. Some seemed deliberate. Two short horizontal lines stood out under each eye and a double row of round dots marched across his forehead. The massive scars that tore across his cheeks and drew his lips into a twisted sneer could hardly have been intentional, though. Tycho touched one then the other. "Something went straight through," he said. He peered into the man's mouth. "He's missing a lot of teeth. His tongue...

"He shuddered.

Li looked to the Hooded's interpreter. Seeing her master so savagely beaten had taken the fight out of her. He moved over and dragged her closer, tugging the makeshift gag out of her mouth. "What did that?" he asked. "An arrow." Tycho grunted. "He's lucky, then. Higher, lower, farther back, different angle—he'd be long dead. No wonder he wore a hood and needed someone to speak for him." He frowned and ran his fingers across the dotted lines on the man's forehead. "Li," he said slowly, "I think I've heard of him. They called him the Stitched Man. He was a pirate." He twisted around. "He sailed with Sowl"

Li blinked and stared. "But in Telflamm, they said Brin was the last survivor."

"Shows what you know," spouted the Hooded's interpreter. Li growled at her.

"She's right," said Tycho. "If you think Yu Mao might still be alive, why not someone else from the ship?"

Li pressed his lips together and looked down at the scarred man then at Tycho. "Can you heal him like you healed me?"

"Not old scars like these."

"I mean can you wake him up?" Tycho nodded. Li picked up a sword. "Do it."

The bard turned back to the Hooded. Taking a deep breath, he placed his hands over the man's forehead and sang. The song was complex and soft. It was, Li realized, the longest he had heard Tycho sing since they had met—all of the other spells he had cast were short and either jarring or slippery and subtle. For a moment, he lost himself in awe. Tycho's voice wasn't quite as stunning as Veseene's, but it was still astonishing. And he chose to sing in taverns?

The song ended and Tycho stepped back. The bloody cut on the Hooded's head had vanished. His breathing was deep and regular. His eyes had slipped all the way shut.

Tycho reached down and flicked the end of his nose. The Hooded started. His eyes snapped open.

Li made sure that the first thing he saw was the end of his sword. The Hooded's eyes rose to meet his. They narrowed sharply and flicked to the side and found his interpreter. He said .. something. The words came out mangled, a harsh string of sounds twisted by a scarred tongue. Li could guess at their meaning though. He hissed and flicked the sword. "She's fine," he said in Common. "You just answer my questions."

The man's eyes narrowed again as if he had not expected Li to speak the language. Li could have cursed himself—all of the silences that he had thought were Yu Mao's stunned surprise were just moments of confusion. The Hooded simply didn't speak Shou. "What's your name?" he said harshly. "No 'Hooded' or 'Stitched Man.' I've had enough of that."

The man grumbled something and, across the room, his interpreter said, "Staso."

Li shut her out, focusing on the scarred man. "You served on a pirate ship called the Sow." Staso nodded slowly. "What do you know of a Shou named Kuang Yu Mao?"

Staso growled and spat. Li caught the spittle on the blade of the sword and flicked it back at him. "I said what do you know—" Staso cut him off with a snarling response.

"I see him in your face. Take your revenge and kill me now because I'm not going to tell you anything about that serpent!"

Serpent? "I came west to kill my brother, not you," Li snarled back. "Tell me what I want to know and you'll live."

Tycho winced. "Li, that might not be such a good idea..." Li ignored him and met Staso's hard gaze.

"When I sent his name up to you," he guessed, "you told your man to get rid of us fast because you were afraid'.

"I fear nothing. Death has already touched me." Staso's scar-stretched lips curled back even further. He held up his chin and turned his head to display his scarred cheeks. "Yu Mao did this." Li's jaw clenched. Tycho caught his eye and gestured, miming a spell. Behind them both, Staso's young

woman gasped and called a warning. Staso just laughed, a horrid gobbling sound. He babbled something. The young woman didn't translate it.

Li twisted around and glared at her as Staso repeated his babbling. "What's he saying?"

She swallowed and said, "You don't need magic. I'll tell you what you want to know." Staso smiled. "But if you love your brother, you won't like it."

"I don't like you, Staso" Li spat. He settled into a crouch on the carpeted floor. The sword didn't waver. "Try to surprise me. I know that Yu Mao betrayed his ship to the Sow and murdered the Shou with him. I know that he was your sorceress-captain's lover. Tell me more."

The scarred man's eyes hardened. "How about that he was a merciless savage?" He watched Li intently as if looking for a reaction. Li didn't give him one. After a moment, Staso continued. "Yu Mao was a vicious man, more cruel than any of us—except possibly Brin. The two of them got along well, but the rest of the crew came to fear Yu Mao. He was as likely to put steel into one of Sow's crew as into any enemy we fought. We went to the captain with our concerns, but she was too lust-sotted with her exotic Shou man to listen. That was her error. Yu Mao tired of her before she tired of him. He'd been with us barely a year before he and Brin hatched a plan for mutiny."

"On the eve of Highharvestide in the Year of the Unstrung Harp, after one of the best seasons of plunder we'd ever seen, Yu Mao woke the captain with one of his great chopping swords to her neck in the bed that they shared. He and Brin hauled her out and tied her to the mainmast. Then they called all of the crew out on deck. They had the support of some mutineers already, but not enough. So they offered us a choice: join them or leave Sow, alive but surrendering their share of the booty we'd gathered. Anybody who wanted to fight was welcome to try that, too, but they'd be in for a world of hurt." Staso drew a deep breath. "And to

show how serious they were, Yu Mao took the captain's arms, stretched them out above her head, and drove a spike through her hands and into the mast!"

His broken voice dropped low and his interpreter's with it. "There're some in every crew that put themselves and their gold first above all else, and they had an easy choice. But some of us know a good captain is worth more than gold and we knew then that if we left Sow, our captain was going to die a mean death. As soon as we saw the captain stretched out along the mast like a fish for the gutting, the moon rising full behind her, something in us broke." Staso's eyes were bright and wild, and as he spoke his voice rose with fiery passion. "Lord of All Thieves, we put up a fight! There wasn't a man or woman among the mutineers who didn't cross steel or knock heads with us. It was all for naught, though—there were twice as many as cared for gold and blood as cared for shipmates' loyalty, and numbers held the deck. I got closer than anyone to the captain, so close I could see her eyes rolled back and her mouth moving in pain as the blood ran from her hands

down her arms. I couldn't get close enough, though. Yu Mao himself stopped my charge."

Staso sneered at Li. "You aren't half the swordsman he was. He fought me all the way back to the ship's rail, knocked my sword from my hand, and would have done me in right then if the captain hadn't opened her eyes and screamed out." He leaned forward, almost spitting himself on Li's blade. "All that muttering and mouthing wasn't pain-madness, it was magic—the last of the captain's magic, all poured out at once."

"Her voice swept down the deck like a cold wind in the moonlight as she turned her soul to working a curse. Everyone stopped and listened—everyone except those of us who had fought for her and lived. We knew a break when we saw it, and we ran for the ship's boats. I gave Yu Mao a good one in the gut and grabbed his swords before I went.

While the captain called out her curse, we piled into one of the boats and got ourselves off Sow faster than spawning sea-devils."

"What was this curse?" breathed Tycho.

"It was three-fold," Staso hissed, sitting back. "On the crew that had turned against her, a promise of a cold grave, that the Sow wouldn't sail into spring. On Brin, the mate who had betrayed her, a wish that the sea take him like the pig he was and that he squeal his last in Umber-lee's arms."

"And on Yu Mao?" Li asked. Staso met his eyes.

"An oath on her blood that he would not live to forget Sow." His breath grated. "Those were the last words that she spoke—Brin put his dagger in her throat before she could say anything more."

"And?"

Staso's ruined face went still. After a moment, he said softly, "And the ship went mad. From our boat on the water, we heard Yu Mao first, laughing at the captain's curse, telling everyone it was nothing but a madwoman's words, a spell broken before it was complete. Brin joined in, and the mutineers did too. There was a commotion, and we saw them carry something to the ship's rail. It took us a moment before we realized that it was the captain's body—Bitch Queen's mercy, she was so shriveled she might have died in a desert instead of at sea! They threw her overboard and the water took her without so much as a splash. That might have scared a few of them, but then Yu Mao called for a bow. We rowed like demons, but when Yu Mao had his bow, he nocked an arrow and took aim at us."

"He personally picked off four of us in the boat before the other mutineers took up the same game and began showering us with arrows." Staso touched his cheeks. "But this was one of Yu Mao's. I know it. It knocked me into the bottom of the boat and that was the only reason I survived. When I woke, I was lying under dead men. Sow was gone. Brin and Yu Mao had left us for the birds."

Tycho's eyes were drawn tight and focused on Staso. Li had a feeling he was committing the whole story to memory, the better for a retelling later. "What did you do?" asked the bard.

"What any man with the will to survive would do," said Staso. "I broke the shaft of Yu Mao's arrow and pulled the pieces out of my cheeks. I pushed the dead weight of my former mates overboard. And I rowed. I rowed until my hands were blistered, then I bound them up, and I rowed some more. Sharks followed my boat for a day and I thank Umberlee that nothing worse found me. Maybe the captain's spirit was watching over me, too, because

I hit the coast of Altumbel the next day. As soon as I set foot on dry land, I swore that I would never take to the sea again. But a man's got to eat, and thieving's the only trade I know. The Stitched Man was too well known, though. And whether the captain's curse was real or not, I didn't want word that I was alive getting back to Sow." His eyes drifted, and he shuddered. "I may not fear death now, but when I came ashore, I feared Yu Mao more than anything in this world or the next."

"So you took the identity of the Hooded," guessed Li. "And Yu Mao's swords?"

"Sold them to that idiot Jacerryl Dantakain for enough gold to get me started. When word spread at the end of the winter that Sow hadn't been sighted in several ten-days, I was happier than a clam. I even started to wonder if the captain's curse really had come to pass—until Brin walked into town with his herd of pigs."

Li tilted his head. "He'd escaped the curse?" Staso just shrugged.

"I don't even know if there was a curse. Yu Mao might have been right. Brin's dagger might have killed the captain before her magic was finished. Ships vanish frequently enough without being cursed."

"Maybe there was a curse, maybe there wasn't," suggested

Tycho. "Tales I've heard always make curses out to be fickle things and someone who is frightened enough of a curse might just take it seriously. The captain of Sow wished that the sea take Brin like the pig he is." He gave his crooked smile. "Brin's never far from at least one pig. Whether the curse is real or not, Brin thinks he's found a way around it—surround himself with pigs and the sea won't find him. Whatever happened to Sow, Brin survived. Maybe there were pigs around when he did."

Staso glowered. "That's insane."

"No one has accused Brin of sanity lately."

"I hope he's sane enough to answer one question for me," growled Li. His hand tightened on the sword hilt. "You tell a good story," he told Staso, "and all I can do is apologize for what Yu Mao did. But I still need to know what happened to him."

The scarred man shook his head. "I only know what I saw that last night on Sow and what I've heard since—or what I haven't heard. There's been no word of Yu Mao, alive or dead."

Breath hissed between Li's teeth, and he caught Tycho's eye. The bard grimaced and Li knew that they were thinking the same thing: they had answers, but not enough.

They still needed to go back to Brin.

Li looked back to Staso and flicked the sword tip a little closer to him. "The beljurils that Jacerryl Dantakain sold you yesterday. Where are they?"

Staso tipped his head toward a big chest in the corner of the room. Tycho scrambled for it, but Li stopped him with a hiss. He glanced at Staso's interpreter. "Let her open it," he suggested.

The young woman's eyes, wide from the telling of her master's tale, shrank and she shook her head sharply. Li slipped the sword up against Staso's neck. "If the chest is trapped," he said, "you should tell her how to disarm it." Staso's mouth twisted and he said something softly to the

young woman. She nodded desperately. Tycho freed her from her silken bonds and, one hand near his dagger, led her to the chest. Trembling fingers touched and slid, not along the obvious latch, but across the sides of the chest's lid. Hidden catches clicked. Hands still shaking slightly, the young woman twisted the front latch and lifted the lid.

Nothing happened. She gasped and relaxed, deep breaths wracking her body, but she reached inside just deep enough to produce a small velvet bag. Tycho glanced into the chest as well. "Your dao is here, too, Li!" He snatched out the weapon and clipped it awkwardly to his belt. "Bind me, there's a lot of other—"

"Don't take anything else, Tycho. We're not the thieves here."

The bard swore softly, but stepped away from the chest, prodding Staso's young woman ahead of him. He tugged open the bag and spilled a tiny handful of gems into his palm. His face lit up. "They're all here."

"Good." Li began to rise.

A sudden yell from the stairs below interrupted him.

"Hooded! Hooded!" Footsteps started up.

Li froze, sword still at Staso's neck. Tycho thought faster than he did. He spun the young woman around to face the stairs. "Stop him!" he hissed.

Startled, she spat out imperiously, "Don't come up!" Tycho prodded her and she added, "What is it?"

The unseen man on the stairs seemed taken aback by the orders from above. "I... I just came in with news and found the others trapped! It was, Tycho—he must have escaped. Are you all right?"

Tycho's gaze darted to Li. The Shou grimaced. It had only been a matter of time! Tycho whispered hastily to Staso's interpreter. "I'm fine!" she called down. Her eyes were wide with shock and fear, and it seemed she relayed Tycho's words purely out of instinct. "Tycho must have gotten out!"

"Dilla says she didn't see him or his Shou friend come through the shop."

Tycho clenched his jaw. "Li?" he hissed.

"Li?" Staso's interpreter repeated out loud.

"Hooded?" asked the man on the stairs. Tycho winced and poked the young woman. She squeaked.

"Stall him!" Li said softly. He grabbed Staso's fallen hood with his free hand and tossed it to the scarred man. "Get that back on." At the stairs, Tycho whispered to the young woman—she called down to the man below to deliver his news.

The answer that came back wasn't good. "There's fire in dockside. A tavern called the Wench's Ease."

Tycho stiffened. Li's stomach tightened. An accident? It didn't seem likely. He hauled Staso to his feet, sword close to his neck. The long blade was awkward so close, and he would have dropped it for a dagger if he could have. "Tie her again," he told Tycho. "Fast." As the bard grabbed for the long piece of silk and looped it quickly around the interpreter's wrists, Li thrust Staso over to the head of the stairs. The man below—a guard even younger than the interpreter, it seemed—looked up and alarm spread across his face.

"Get off the stairs," Li ordered him. He said it slowly and clearly, making sure the young man understood every word—and that he could see the sword at the Hooded's throat.

"We're coming down. Keep all your men back!"

The man nodded. He stepped down the stairs backward and vanished. Li heard him yelling.

Staso snarled something out, a long threat. Li growled back at him, pulling the sword closer, but he just kept babbling harshly. Tycho gave the interpreter a shake. "What's he saying?"

The young woman swallowed. "Even if you get out, do you think I'm going to let this pass? You've threatened me. You've made me look weak in front of my men. You know my

identity. You—"

"That's enough," said Li. He tightened his grip on Staso. "You listen to me," he said over the hooded man's unintelligible threats. "We're not going to tell anyone who you are. I gave you back your hood, didn't I? Keep peace with us and your identity stays a secret. Come after us or try to kill us, and his magic—" He nodded to Tycho. "—will whisper your secret and word of your hideout to every person in Spandeliyon. Including Brin. I'm sure he'd like to see you again."

That made Staso's voice stumble. "Good," Li said tightly. "You understand." He gave him a nudge onto the stairs. "Now move."

They went down slowly, Staso first. His interpreter they left bound in the upper room. As soon as they were on the stairs, she began screeching. Her shrieks followed them all the way down into the room at the foot of the stairs. The young guard was waiting below. "Out ahead of us," Li told him. He moved and they followed him out into the Hooded's hall. Two of the three guards Tycho had charmed into sleep were there, swords bared. Li made sure they saw his sword. "Keep back," he warned.

"Li," Tycho murmured, "the man with the crossbow isn't here."

"I know." He steered the Hooded to the door leading back down to the leatherworker's shop. Tycho darted ahead to pull the door open and moved back to keep an eye on the guards behind them. Li shoved Staso into the short hallway beyond, twisting him toward the murder slots in its wall. A shadow moved on the other side. "You'll kill him first," Li warned. The shadow shifted, though it didn't withdraw.

Tycho closed the door and drove his dagger into the floor to wedge it shut. Li nodded for him to pass the murder slots first and followed after, using Staso as hostage and shield.

The stairs down to the shop below were clear. The shopkeeper herself gave a sharp gasp at the sight of the

Hooded held captive. "Open the door; then step away," said Li. She did and light flooded into the shop, throwing a sharp shadow behind her as she backed away into a corner. Tycho slipped cautiously through the door and peered up, checking for any new ambush and nodded. Safe.

Li took Staso right up to the doorstep and turned him around so they were both facing into the shop. "You should know," he said, "how close you came to dying when I thought you were Yu Mao. I may not be my brother, but you should be just as afraid of me."

He gave the hooded man a hard push that sent him stumbling away and jumped back through the door. He pulled it shut on the sword blade, jamming the weapon between door and frame right at the level of the interior handle. The sharp metal would make it hard for anyone to pull the door open quickly from inside. Tycho was already up the stairs. Li leaped up after him and the bard handed him his dao. Crown Alley was quiet, the few people hastening along it and talking in sharp voices about the fire in dockside blissfully unaware of what had taken place above the leatherworker's shop. He and Tycho joined them in a slow, deliberate walk away from the Hooded's lair and back toward dockside. His heartbeat was thunder in his chest.

Tycho cursed with every breath. "How many balls are we juggling now, Li?"

"I don't know." He looked up and down toward the waterfront. Smoke stood stark against the late afternoon sky. They were a block beyond the Hooded's lair now. He glanced at Tycho. "When would be a good time to run?"

"Now!" spat the bard. They ran.

Fire had claimed the Wench's Ease. Flames kissed every board and beam, turning gray wood to black char then to white-gray ash that glowed red underneath. The roof of the tavern had disappeared at one end, collapsed as the fire ate through the beams beneath. Smoke belched up through the

ruin and into the sky, a thick cloud that cast a storm shadow over the yard—over the entire neighborhood. Cinders drifted back down like burning snow, sizzling as they hit the flowing muck melted by the fierce heat and churned up by the feet of a mob.

People were everywhere. Fisher folk. Merchants. Guards. Some had formed bucket gangs, scooping water from a nearby well or soft snow from fading drifts. Some were shouting over the fire's roar, screaming for a priest or a mage with the magic to quench the flames. Others had hooks on poles for pulling down burning walls or long brooms for beating out cinder fires.

No one, however, was trying to save the Ease. The tavern belonged to the flames. It was as good as gone. The mob worked to keep the blaze from spreading farther into dockside. People who had homes or shops in the other buildings around the yard were carrying out anything that was light enough to carry, frantic to save what they could. Tycho had a good idea where the priests and mages that they called for would be: working their magic farther uptown. Even if dockside burned, middle town would be safe.

His own magic was of no use here. The door of the Ease stood open and shattered, a portal into the heart of an inferno. Above it, the tavern's painted sign had blistered and scorched from buxom wench to twisted crone.

The heat drove away the sweat of their run from Crown Alley as Tycho led Li through the surging crowd. They found Muire underneath the tree in the yard, huddled against the cold wood of its trunk. Rana was with her and one-legged Blike. The matron of the Ease was sobbing as she watched her tavern vanish into embers and ash. She looked up and saw Tycho and her smoke-reddened eyes flashed. "You!" she screamed and hurled herself at him. Rana tried to stop her, but Muire slapped the other woman back and grabbed for Tycho. He dodged away.

She was quicker and had him with a second grab. Dragging him close, she shrieked in his face. "This is all your fault! You and your quarrel with Brin!"

Tycho's heart shrank. "Brin? Did Brin do this? Muire, I—"

With a sudden crash and crackle, the other side of the Ease's roof fell in. A new cloud of cinders bellowed up and flew around. Many swarmed like insects toward another building. An army of broom and bucket wielders chased after them. Guards with long poles moved in to poke at the tavern's burning walls, trying to topple them inward before they crumbled out. Muire moaned and fell back. Tycho managed to catch her and ease her back against the tree. He looked to Rana and Blike. "Was it Brin?"

"Sweet truth," spat Blike. "Danced in like a jig and hopped up to have a talk with Muire. And while he's talking and she's getting whiter and whiter, we all start to smell smoke. Before we can move, Brin jumps down and runs out, slamming the door behind him. Someone jams it from the other side and we're trapped like bread in an oven. We had to break the door to get out."

"Bastard halfling wanted to kill us all!" Rana added. She pointed a thick, blistered finger. "It was revenge for what you and your elf-blood friend brought down last night!"

Tycho stared at that pointing finger and looked up. "I.. .." He swallowed and spread his hands helplessly. "Rana. Blike. I didn't mean to... " He turned. "Muire... "

The tavern keeper glared at him and shook her head— at Rana. "Brin didn't want to kill us," she said softly. "He was just playing the same games he always does. If he wanted us to burn, we'd still be inside. He wanted us to get out." Her eyes went back to Tycho. "He knew you'd come," she said. "That wherever you were hiding, you would come when you heard the Ease was burning. He told me to give you a message."

Tycho froze. "What was it?"

"Go home."

Veseene. Brin had done something to Veseene. Tycho knew it immediately. "Divine Tymora, smile on a stupid dock rat," he breathed. "Li!" He spun around. "We have to-"

The Shou caught his shoulder and pointed across the yard.

Mard Dantakain was marching toward them. Soot streaked his face, and he had one of the long hooked poles in his hands. He looked ready to kill with it. "Tychoben Arisaenn!" he bellowed, his voice even louder than the fire. "Where is my daughter?"

Tycho's heart skipped. If Brin had gone to Bakers Way, Veseene wouldn't have been the only one he found there. Mard was practically on top of them. Tycho swallowed.

"Gods witness me," he protested desperately, "I don't know!"

"You're a damned liar!" Mard swept out with the pole.

Li reached out and snatched it from his grasp. He whirled the pole up into the air, spinning it around in his hands as he took a fast step back. The broad, heavy hook on its end came down behind Mard's legs. The guard captain tried to jump aside, but Li pulled hard and Mard slammed down on his back. He leaped up quickly, but the Shou spun the pole again. This time the straight end cracked across his belly. Mard folded up around it with a grunt and went down once more.

People were staring and other guards were shouting. Li flung the pole aside. "Come on!" he yelled. He started running. Tycho flashed Muire a look of apology, darted past Mard, and sprinted after Li.

The sound of the fire, of Muire's sob, and Mard's roaring rage followed them. The way from the Ease to Bakers Way was shorter than from Crown Alley to the Ease. Somehow, though, it seemed longer. Brin had set the Wench's Ease on fire. What had he done to Veseene and Laera?

Thankfully, no smoke stood out above Bakers Way. The man who had been watching the street earlier was gone. Li shouted caution, but Tycho flung open the outer door of the building and charged up the stairs screaming Veseene's

name.

He caught himself on the door frame of their rooms and stared. The door had been shattered. Big pieces of splintered wood were strewn across the floor. Sprawled in the middle of the room was a corpse.

For a moment, Tycho's heart simply stopped—and rushed back to life as he realized it wasn't Veseene.

"Jacerryl," said Li quietly from behind him. The Shou pushed past and knelt down beside the dead man. Tycho swallowed hard and joined him. Jacerryl's wounds were horrific. "What did this?" Li asked.

"Black Scratch," Tycho replied. The body stank of death and pig dung. He pointed at the knife wound over Jacerryl's heart. "With help."

"Brin must have caught him. There's not enough blood here, though. He died somewhere else." Li took hold of the corpse's shoulder and heaved it up enough to peer underneath. "There are pieces of the door and broken dishes under him. He was dropped here after your rooms were wrecked."

Tycho rose and turned around slowly. The cupboard had been opened and everything spilled out. The fireplace had smoldered down to ashes. The room was cold—the shutters on the front window were flung wide, letting light and wintry air flood in. Veseene's couch had been overturned and his cot smashed. The door of the back room was open as well and by the light of the open back window, he could see more damage in there. Destruction for the sake of destruction, he guessed. He couldn't have said if anything was missing.

Li could. "Yu Mao's butterfly swords are gone," he said.

"Brin must have taken them."

His strilling had been hung by its strap above the fireplace mantle. There was a folded piece of paper wedged under the strings. Suddenly numb, Tycho stepped across Jacerryl's torn body and pulled out the paper—it came free with a soft jangle. He unfolded it.

Come play me and Veseene a song. You know where. Bring the Yellow Silk of Kuang.

The note wasn't signed. The devastation in the room was signature enough. Tycho clenched his teeth and thrust it at Li. The Shou shook his head. "I can't read it."

"You probably don't want to." He read the note out loud and Li choked.

"Brin knows about the Yellow Silk!" Li's hand went to his arm. "How is that possible?"

"Yu Mao," Tycho pointed out. "He probably told Brin all kinds of stories about Shou Lung. When you started throwing bolts of light around last night, he must have recognized the Yellow Silk's power."

"But the Silk is our family's greatest treasure," protested Li.

"Yu Mao wouldn't have. ... " His voice faded as Tycho gave him a long look and he closed his eyes for a moment. "I suppose Yu Mao could have done anything, couldn't he?"

"After hearing what Staso said, I don't think anything I heard about him would surprise me. The Silk might be why Brin was looking for you last night, too." Tycho's eyes narrowed sharply even as the words came out of his mouth. "No, that's not right. Brin was looking for you before you used the Yellow Silk."

"Maybe he knows more than we think—maybe he guessed that I would have the Silk." Li rubbed a hand across his face.

"Maybe he just wants me because I'm Yu Mao's brother."

"Maybe." Tycho crumpled the note in his fist and hurled it into the cold ashes of the fireplace. An heirloom artifact of ancient magic in exchange for Veseene and Laera. He couldn't ask Li to give up his family's treasure, but if they didn't give Brin the Silk... Brin hadn't made any threats in his note but he didn't need to. He looked at Li only to find the Shou looking at him. Tycho drew a breath between his teeth. "What are we going to do, Li?"

"If Brin had the Yellow Silk, would he keep it or sell it?"

"Knowing Brin? Sell it."

"How much are the beljurils worth?"

"Probably not enough—and Brin likely isn't going to accept something he thinks belongs to him anyway." Tycho glared at Jacerryl's corpse and spat on it. "Damn you. Damn you and Mard and Laera!"

Laera.

Tycho ducked down and grabbed Brin's note out of the fireplace, smoothing it over his knee. Play me and Veseene a song, the halfling had written. He looked up sharply. "Li, Brin doesn't have Laera!" He jumped up, spinning around and sweeping the room with his gaze.

"Tycho, she could be anywhere!"

"Not if her father's still looking for her!" Tycho ran into the back room. Just as he had seen through the door, this room was a shambles, too. His chest had been dumped out and its contents spread across the floor. "Laera!" He ground his teeth. There was nowhere to hide in the two little rooms! His eye fell on the window. The rope that he had left knotted to the bedpost was gone. He leaned out the window and scanned the shadowed alley below. The rope was there, pooled on the ground. "Laera!" he shouted. He swung over the sill and let himself down until he was hanging by his hands and dropped the rest of the way.

A shadow in a narrow little niche gasped at the sound of his landing. "Laera?" Tycho called softly. He went over and crouched down, reaching for the shape huddled inside.

"Laera, it's all right. It's Tycho."

She all but fell out of the niche into his arms, weeping desperately and gasping his name over and over so fast it was almost incomprehensible. He tried to help her stand up, but her arms and legs were knotted—when he tried to straighten them, she gasped again, this time in pain. How long had she been wedged into that tiny hole? He began to massage her joints gently as he murmured comforting words. "Shhh... it's all right. It's all right."

"Tycho?" The bard glanced up. Li was leaning out of his

window.

"She's fine," he called back. "Just stiff. We'll go around and come up the stairs." He looked back to Laera. "Do you think you can walk?" She drew a shaky breath and nodded. Tycho helped her stand. As he took her hand to lead her out of the alley, though, she hissed. "What is it?" Tycho asked.

"My hands," she whimpered. He uncurled her fingers gingerly and clenched his teeth at the site of flesh scraped raw. "The rope," Laera said. "I slid down the rope to get away."

"We'll put ointment on them upstairs," he said. "Can you tell me what happened while we walk?"

She told him what little she had seen and heard of Brin's sudden visit and her escape. Even when everything had gone quiet again, she had been too terrified to move and had prayed desperately that Brin and whoever was with him—Lander most likely, Tycho guessed—wouldn't come looking for her. Just when she had thought it might be safe to move again, though, there had been more noises above: cursing and the heavy thud of something falling.

That would have been Jacerryl's body being brought in, Tycho knew—and winced at the thought of what lay waiting for Laera in the room. They were on the stairs. He called ahead in Shou. "Li, cover the body!"

"I already have!"

Laera, however, wasn't so easily fooled. As soon as they crossed the threshold, her eyes fell on the blanket-shrouded form sprawled out on the floor. A short shriek escaped her and she stiffened. "Veseene?"

Tycho hesitated then drew her over and uncovered Jacerryl's face. Laera shuddered and looked away. "What happened?"

"Brin killed him."

Li had set the couch back on its legs. Tycho sat Laera down and tried to find a little pot of ointment that had been in the cupboard. When he did, the jar was cracked. He split it open the rest of the way, scooped some out on his fingertip, and

rubbed it gently into Laera's right hand.

She watched him without saying anything for a moment then she asked, "Brin has Veseene, doesn't he?" Tycho nodded. "Did you get back the beljurils?" He nodded again. "Then everything will be fine, won't it?"

Tycho looked to Li. The Shou was prowling around the room, poking through the wreckage as if there might be something else to find, some other clue to what had happened. Tycho couldn't imagine that there would be. A bard's life was built on subtlety, but he felt like Brin had taken all of his and beaten it to the ground with a great big stick. He' looked back to Laera. "No," he said bluntly. "It won't. Brin is holding Veseene hostage for Li's Yellow Silk."

Laera's big brown eyes flicked up. For a heartbeat, Tycho felt as if she were looking right through him and trying to see something larger, and then she tipped her head to one side. "You're going to give it to him, get Veseene away, then steal back the Silk." Tycho looked away, scooping up more ointment and spreading it on her left palm. She tensed slightly. "You're going to help Veseene escape so Brin never even sees the Silk."

Tycho's fingers moved up hers, smoothing the ointment onto her rope-burned skin. Laera sucked in a sharp breath. "You're ... you're just going to give it to him?"

He said nothing.

"Bind you, Tychoben Arisaenn, you can't not give it to him!"

"It's not mine to give," Tycho whispered. "I can't even ask for that." He looked up. "Did Veseene tell you the story about Dain Gallidy and Eiter the Nar?" Laera nodded stiffly. "I thought so. Two days ago, you wouldn't have even thought of any possibility beyond a heroic triumph."

He let her hand go and looked at her closely. "If we get through this," he said, "I'll take you as my apprentice." Her eyes went wide. Tycho held up a cautioning finger. "But," he said, "I want you to go home. Right now. Whatever we do, it's going to be dangerous. We might very well not come

back. If you're in your father's house, you'll be safe."

Laera held her head high. "Uncle Jacerryl lived in my father's house."

"And if you hurry back, you can claim some of his things before anyone's the wiser. I'll send you a message when it's safe." Tycho rose and started to pull her up.

She stayed right where she was, her jaw set and her eyes defiant. "If you're going to rescue Veseene, I want to go with you." She tugged her hand out of Tycho's. "If you're not going to rescue her, I don't want to be your apprentice."

"Laera..." Tycho growled.

Li's hand clapped him on the shoulder. The Shou's expression was grim. "Do you really want an apprentice who runs at the first sign of danger, Tycho?" He looked at Laera.

"Will you slow us down?" he asked. "If you're captured, will we need to fight for you?" Laera's eyes darted

from the Shou's hard face to Tycho's and back again. She swallowed. "No," she said.

"Then I say you should come with us." He looked at Tycho.

The bard sighed and pressed his knuckles against his forehead. "All right," he said through gritted teeth—and glanced up sharply. "Wait—come with us where?" he asked.

"To make a delivery to Brin." Li opened his shirt and shook his left arm out of its sleeve. With his right hand, he loosened the knot that bound the Yellow Silk around his arm and pulled it free. Light shimmered as the folds of the silk fell apart; where the light played across his face, Tycho could feel the warmth of a summer's day.

The Shou held the Yellow Silk out to him.

Tycho stared at it. "Li," he breathed, "I can't—"

"—ask me for this?" Li's lips curled ever so slightly into a smile. "When you're in a small room, even a whisper is a shout." His hand didn't waver. "You don't need to ask. Yu Mao disgraced the name of Kuang. It's my duty to return honor to it." >

"But this..." Tycho hesitated. "Yesterday, you asked me for

help. I feel like you're doing more to help me."

"If that bothers you, I'll say that I'm doing it for Veseene. Or that I'm doing it for myself—I still need to ask Brin about Yu Mao's last days."

"If he'll talk to you without trying to capture you."

Li shrugged. "A chance I have to take. With luck, his answer will be that the captain's curse came to pass and Yu Mao lies with the Sow under the sea." He met Tycho's gaze with quiet calm. "Better me than a stranger; better me than no one at all—but better still that Yu Mao has already stood before the Lords of Karma and received their judgment. Thank you for giving me the chance to realize that."

He reached out and grabbed Tycho's hand, thrusting the Silk into it and folding his fingers around it. Tycho almost gasped—the Yellow Silk was warm! Just holding it, he could feel the energy within the woven threads, at once both as gentle and as intense as the sun itself, the pride of an old and honest family. He looked down at the precious, wondrous artifact in his hand—and up, a fierce smile on his face.

"Bind me," he said, "I've had just about enough of Brin. He's not going to get his hands on this and he's not going to get away with threatening Veseene." He turned around and reached up above the fireplace with his free hand to pull down his strilling. "If he wants a song, he's got one."

CHAPTER 14

Sunset raked across the west end of Spandeliyon's waterfront, lending warmth to the light if not to the air. The snow might be melting, but it was still cold enough that every exhaled breath produced a little cloud of vapor and every inhaled breath sank a chill into Li's nose and throat.

He said nothing as they—he, Tycho, and Laera—walked. The streets were empty, as empty as they had been two nights ago when he first arrived. Then, however, they had been empty because of the hour and the beginning of a snow flurry. Now they were empty because of a storm of a different kind: the fire at the Wench's Ease had drawn everyone who might otherwise be on the street to either fight the blaze or watch it. Thick smoke still reached into the sky, though it had gotten no thicker and the biting smell of it no stronger. The fire was slowly coming under control.

If Brin had planned the fire to get everyone off the streets as well as bring Tycho running to the scene, he couldn't have done a better job. The streets were so quiet that Li could hear the waves seething against the docks a short distance away.

As they approached the Eel, Laera stared at the sinuous form on the festhall's wall and shivered. Li touched her shoulder. "That's only a painting," he reminded her. "Don't be afraid of it. Be afraid of what we'll face."

She gulped. Tycho glowered at him.

"No more reassuring talks, Li. I don't think they're helping." The bard checked the strilling on his back and the dagger at his belt and glanced from Li to Laera. "Ready?"

Laera nodded. Li nodded, too. His fingers curled and uncurled around the scabbard of his dao. Tycho shoved against the Eel's painted door.

To Li's surprise, the Eel was as quiet within as the street without. No desperate drunkards, no brass-clad women, no sorrowful gamblers. The place had been cleared out entirely. There wasn't even any sign of Brin—not that the hin's

absence came as that much of a surprise. Tycho had reasoned everything out before they left Bakers Lane. Brin will wait for us in the sty behind the Eel. It's where he always does his business.

One figure moved in the dim light of the empty festhall. The big bartender was at his post. He jerked his bald head toward the back of the Eel. Li drew a deep breath. So far it seemed Tycho was right. He hoped that the bard was wrong on his next guess, though.

He'll have us outnumbered. Lander will be there for sure, and likely Serg, Bor, Nico, and Ovel, too. And Black Scratch. With Brin, that will be seven against three.

Tycho had counted Laera to be polite, but not even she believed him. It would be seven to two. A hard fight, hand-to-hand. They would need Tycho's magic—and the magic of the Yellow Silk. Tycho had protested the use of the ancient artifact—they were trying to protect it, weren't they?—but Li had argued him down. His father had entrusted him with the Silk for use in desperate situations. What was this situation if not desperate?

Better to use the Silk than surrender it without a fight, he thought as well, especially when the Silk wasn't the only thing at stake. Tycho hadn't been able to guess at Veseene's condition or circumstances in Brin's grasp.

Li's fingers curled against his dao again. He needed Brin to answer one question for him. And after that...

"Li?" Tycho nudged him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm almost done here, Tycho." He looked down at the bard.

"One way or the other, I'll be done. I'll have an answer about Yu Mao. If Brin says he's dead, I can go back to Keelung. If Brin says he's alive somewhere else, I'll be leaving Spandeliyon to find him."

"And if Brin kills us before he gives you an answer?" Tycho asked in Shou.

Li glanced at Laera, but of course the young woman, didn't understand the language. His mouth twitched in a grim

smile. "I thought you said no more reassuring talks?" he said to Tycho.

"You're not scared?"

"Witless," said Li, quoting Tycho's own words back at him. "It's the only smart way." He held out his hand in the Western manner. "If Brin kills us, Tycho, then I'm glad to have met you."

Tycho took his hand and bowed over it.

One of the curtains that had previously been drawn at the festhall's rear was pulled aside to reveal a door of rough, black-painted wood. Tycho paused. "Here we go," he said, and opened it. The smell of pigs washed over them, almost suffocating in its strength. Li followed Tycho through the door and into Brin's infamous sty.

Tycho had described it perfectly. The shadowed alley behind the Eel was wide—as wide as a house. Perhaps five paces to the right, it ended in a tall plank fence. An equal distance to the left was a lower, more open fence of rails. Beyond, the alley twisted back out to the street. A heap of wet straw slumped against the wall of the Eel on the rail fence's far side; against the fence and inside the sty were a long trough and a stout table and bench. At the back of the sty, a low roofed shelter had been built against the wall of the neighboring building. Perhaps a dozen pigs were huddled within, all of them staring out with a frightened intensity.

Brin sat on the table with Veseene, a gag in her mouth and her hands loosely bound, beside him. He held a sharp dagger in his right hand. His left rested on the head of Black Scratch. The boar sat like an angry guard dog beside the table, barely restrained by his master's touch. Lander, Nico, and Serg stood arrayed between the table and the door.

They weren't alone. Against the plank fence lounged five rough-looking men. All armed. Beyond the rail fence stood two other men, one in red robes, the other in normal clothes but wearing confident power like a cloak. Wizards? Li's breath hissed out. His fingers curled against the scabbard

one final time then stayed still.

They had expected to be outnumbered, but not like this.

"Tycho ... " Li murmured.

Brin nodded and Li caught sudden movement out of the corners of his eyes as Bor and Ovel stepped away from the wall behind them. Ovel reached out and shoved the door closed. Laera squeaked in alarm.

"Stick to the plan," Tycho whispered back, but his voice was thin. Li fought to keep a wince off his face. Their plan was meant for seven, not thirteen.

Did they have another choice now? He glanced around, taking careful note of where their opponents stood and trying to guess how they might move, as Tycho stepped forward. "Olore, Brin," the bard called. "You didn't mention that there'd be such an audience."

"But you still brought the full chorus." Brin looked at Laera with a hungry leer and she shrank back. "Dantakain's daughter. Mard's been tearing up the town looking for her and you had her the whole time."

"I don't have her," said Tycho sharply. "I don't take hostages."

Brin smiled. "Why, neither do I. Is it wrong to invite people around for some conversation?" He pricked Veseene with the dagger and the old woman hissed. Her face was pale and she was shaking badly, though Li couldn't tell whether that was because of her palsy or the cold. Above her gag, however, her faded blue eyes flashed angrily—at, them. If she'd been able to talk, Li guessed, she would be berating them for walking into so obvious a trap.

Tycho's eyes narrowed. "Take the gag out of her mouth. Let me talk to her."

"I don't think so," said Brin. His gaze shifted between Tycho and Li. "Do you have the Yellow Silk of Kuang?"

Tycho reached into a pocket of his coat. It seemed as if half the people gathered—but especially Brin and the two wizards—leaned forward in anticipation. Li tensed. Tycho,

however, produced only a small velvet bag. "The beljurils, Brin," he said, spilling the winking gems into his hand.

"You know it was Jacerryl who stole them. He sold them. I got them back." He tipped them back into the bag and held it out. "How about you take them and we part ways? All square?"

Brin's sneer was no surprise. In fact, they had been counting on it. Li forced his expression to remain neutral. Let the hin think they were desperate, he thought, that he had them backed into a corner...

That if he let them simply exchange the Yellow Silk for Veseene and walk out of the Eel, he would be losing the valuable beljurils. Blood in the water draws sharks, Tycho had pointed out. And in spite of his sneer, Brin's eye followed the bag as Tycho passed it to Laera. Lander's eyes followed it as well. Li murmured a silent prayer to Hsing Yong, the patron of fortune and prosperity. The sharks had the scent. It was time to whip them into a feeding frenzy—and, he hoped, to draw out an answer to the question that had brought him from Keelung to Spandeliyon. He stepped forward.

Black Scratch shifted at the sudden gesture and let out a snort, hot breath producing a great cloud of vapor. Brin's hand tightened on the boar's head. Li ignored the beast and glared at Brin with all of the confidence he could muster. "You know who I am and what I carry," he snarled. "You must know why I'm here."

"Kuang Li Chien," Brin replied without hesitation, "dutiful younger son of Kuang." His sneer grew even broader and more mocking. "Seeking vengeance for the death of his beloved brother, Yu Mao."

In spite of himself, Li felt anger rising inside him. "Seeking vengeance on him," he said. "I know how he betrayed his ship and our people to join the Sow." It was gratifying to see Brin stiffen in surprise. So the hin hadn't

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guessed everything. Li returned his sneer. "You sailed with him for a year before the Sow sank. That's how you came to know about the Yellow Silk." He reached for his own pocket. "Before you take it, tell me this and I will not also seek my vengeance on you: where is Yu Mao now?"

Brin released Black Scratch and grabbed Veseene with both hands, dagger tight to her throat. The old woman's eyes were wide. "You're in no position to make demands!" he spat above the enraged bellows of Black Scratch. Lander jumped in to grab the boar and hold him back, but the beast's squeals spread to the pigs in the shelter. The din was deafening.

Li's hand moved closer to his pocket. "Tell me! The Silk is mine to give. Without an answer, you will never get it, no matter who you threaten!" Brin's face twisted and Li added, "If Yu Mao told you about the Silk, he told you I'm stubborn. Vengeance drove me along the Golden Way. Will one old woman's life stop me?"

"All right!" spat Brin. His sneer was fading, but his eye was as hard and bright as one of the beljurils. "He's gone. Yu Mao died when Sow sank."

The words hit Li like a hammer in the gut, even though he had been half-expecting them. Even though he had been half-hoping for them. The captain's curse—Yu Mao had not lived to forget Sow. Yu Mao was already dead. Suddenly it felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him. The fire of his rage faltered.

Brin must have seen it in his face. His grip on Veseene tightened. "Now give me the Silk!"

Li clenched his teeth and his rage flared back to life. His hand dropped away from his pocket. "Give us Veseene first."

The trick to dealing with Brin, Tycho had said as they made their plans, is always to give him exactly what he wants. Do that and you're safe. It's when he's thwarted that he gets angry, and when he's angry, he's dangerous. Just like a shark.

"The Silk!" Brin snarled.

Li braced himself. "Veseene," he said. In his mind's eye, he saw Tycho's crooked smile. And when a shark is angry, it can't control itself. Try to spear a shark when it's in control and you'll never hit it. Get it mad and it will throw itself on your spear.

Brin's lips curled back. His dagger-bearing right hand flinched away from Veseene to point at his gathered thugs. "Get them!" he howled. "Get the Silk, get the beljurils, and kill them!"

The men lounging against the plank fence hurled themselves across the sty. Lander, Serg, and Nico lunged forward. Bor and Ovel closed from behind.

Words had done all they could do. It was time to spear the shark.

Li drew in a sharp breath, focusing himself. Grace and strength seemed to flow into his limbs. In a single smooth motion, he whirled around, left leg snapping out in a spinning kick that cracked into first Ovel then Bor. The thugs staggered back, stunned. Li let his momentum carry him over into a whirling horizontal flip that took him halfway across the sty. He rose with his sheathed dao held horizontally in front of him and a shout on his lips. "Hrah!"

Stunned by Li's acrobatics, Lander and his men pulled up sharply in confusion and turned to face him—just as Tycho had hoped they would. Mostly as he had hoped, at least. Extra men and wizards? Red Wizards, too. Tycho knew them—Mosi Anu and Hanibaz Nassor. He growled a few choice words for Brin under his breath. In their original plan, he had counted on Li's stunning fighting to keep attackers back. The halfling's additional men, gathered up from across dockside, complicated things. At least he was still in the clear. He spun around to face the thugs from the fence, his hands swirling through the air and his voice ringing out with a song of gentle power.

Four of the thugs dropped to the ground in mid-step, fast

asleep. The fifth stumbled, startled by the display of magic. Tycho stepped forward and kicked him viciously in the groin. The man dropped hard. Tycho turned back to face Ovel and Bor as they shook off Li's kick and came back to their feet.

Laera grabbed a spade that was leaning against the wall of the Eel and swung it against Bor's back. The blow was clumsy, but it was enough to send him staggering again. "Tycho!" she called and hurled the spade at him. The bard snatched it out of the air and spun it in a high, menacing sweep. Ovel rocked back, avoiding the heavy metal, but Bor wasn't quite so lucky. The flat side of the spade hit his head with a clang. Bor went sprawling across the floor of the sty. Ovel had his sword out, though. Tycho only barely managed to get the shaft of the spade up in time to catch the blow.

"Laera!" he shouted. "Go!"

Lander caught a brief glimpse of Laera Dantakain ducking past Ovel and Tycho and darting across the sty, the velvet bag of beljurils whirling over her head. A bloody fortune twirling like a sling. Ovel stared. Nico and Serg half-turned as well. Lander cursed and dived for her. He caught her, too, locking one hand around her arm and the other onto the velvet bag—

—just as Ovel caught Tycho's spade in the gut then across the back of the head.

—just as Li Chien launched himself at Nico and Serg with another roaring shout. "Hrah!" The Shou's saber swept out of its scabbard. Nico's sword was out and Li Chien turned the saber against him first, slicing up in a backhanded arc that rang off Nico's hastily raised blade. Li Chien spun with the blow, bringing his weapon down and back around, slashing underneath Nico's sword. Nico fell back with blood pouring out of a wound that crossed his chest from ribs to shoulder.

The same whirling momentum spun Li Chien's off-hand wide and sent the empty scabbard slapping into Serg's face. As the thug stumbled back, Li Chien stepped around behind him, scabbard beating a stinging rhythm about his head

until Serg brought his arms up to protect himself. Quick as a thought, Li Chien stooped down, dropped the scabbard and grabbed the tail of his own long coat, hauling it up and over Serg's head to trap his arms inside. His knee came up and drove sharply into Serg's belly three times in rapid succession. He released his hold on the coat. Serg, still shrouded in the long coat's thick folds, dropped to the ground with a groan.

Lander froze as the man who had just taken down two of his men in a heartbeat turned to him. Laera wrenched herself free and scooted back. The velvet bag of beljurils fell away as well, drawstrings tugging open as it slipped from his grasp.

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Chunks of ordinary gravel tumbled out.

"Bind me!" he choked. Another switch. The girl had been nothing but a distraction! He scrambled to draw his sword. A hollow bellow of rage, however, froze him a second time. Froze him and Li Chien, and even Tycho. Lander had just enough time to spin around and see Black Scratch, bloodlust in the creature's eyes, thundering toward him. No, not toward him. Toward Li Chien.

He just happened to be between them.

He tried to scramble away, but he wasn't fast enough. A toss of Black Scratch's head caught him and jagged pain ripped across his hip. Suddenly he was up in the air, the world spinning around him. Then he was down, flat out on the ground and the only thing spinning over him was sky. Pigs were squealing like mad and pouring out of the shelter as if Black Scratch were the commander of an army, leading his troops into battle. Lander couldn't feel his leg for shock. He managed to turn his head, though. His trip through the air had taken only a heartbeat. Black Scratch was only just reaching Li Chien—except that the Shou wasn't there to meet him. Just as at the Wench's Ease, he was leaping up, letting the boar charge right under him. The ground in the

sty wasn't the smooth floor of the tavern, though. Black Scratch came around in a tight circle for another pass, shouldering lesser pigs aside with ease.

Pain sank into Lander's head. He turned the other way and looked down the length of his body. He saw blood. A lot of blood. Too much blood. He didn't look any closer, but twisted his head up and away.

He wasn't too far from the table. His eyes met first Veseene's—then Brin's. The old woman's gaze was horrified. Brin's was just stunned. Lander reached out an arm.

"Brin!" he screamed. "Help me! It was your damned pig that did this!"

The halfling just spun around. Lander saw Hanibaz Nas-sor and Mosi Anu standing behind him on the other side of the fence, safe from murderous Shou and rampaging pigs. "Do something!" Brin bellowed at them. Lander's head was spinning, but he heard Mosi's answer distinctly.

"We're here for the Yellow Silk, Brin, not to fight."

Lander found the breath to shout a pain-filled curse at the bald wizard and all of his family. He could feel the rumble of Black Scratch's new charge through the ground and he twisted his head around. The boar was bearing down on Li Chien again—and if the Shou leaped again, Black Scratch would be rumbling right at him! With another scream, Lander shoved against the mucky ground and sent himself rolling out of the way. He slammed back into Brin's table, sending the halfling and Veseene swaying and new pain flaring through his leg and side.

Black Scratch's hooves tore up the ground where he had just been lying. Lander pressed himself back against the table and transferred his curse from Mosi Anu to the mad boar.

Behind him, Hanibaz chuckled as if this were the funniest thing he'd ever seen or heard. "Ah, Mosi—how can we let a show like this just come to an end?" A firm hand grabbed onto Lander's flailing arm. Hanibaz spoke a word and new energy seemed to pour into Lander's body at his touch. The

thug gasped at the shock as the magic sank into him. His wound didn't stop hurting, but suddenly he could bear the pain. He rolled to his feet.

"Liked that, did you?" Hanibaz asked. "Let's put you on a more even footing with the Shou, then." He spoke another word and touched Lander a second time.

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This time the energy didn't fade away. When Lander turned and took a step toward Li Chien, it almost felt like he was floating.

"Yes," he breathed. "Oh, yes!"

Li Chien turned away from Black Scratch for a moment and froze.

Lander was up and walking on a leg so deeply wounded he shouldn't have even been able to stand. Muscle flexed beneath torn skin, bone flashed white against red blood, and yet Lander flowed forward like a flame. Magic, Li knew. It could only be magic. He fell back a step and his eyes darted to the wizards standing behind Brin. "Tycho!" he yelled.

"Li!" The bard's hand flashed a warning. Li whirled back around.

Black Scratch was charging again. The pig had an animal's dumb relentless determination. Li clenched his jaw. He could keep leaping out of the boar's way, but the beast would just come back at him again. And now he had Lander to worry about as well.

He tightened his grip on his dao and settled his stance. From the corner of his eye, he saw Brin's mouth drop open as he realized what was about to happen. "No!" the half-ling screamed. Too late. Black Scratch closed.

Li whirled aside, dao sweeping down as he came back around. The heavy steel slashed into the thick flesh of Black Scratch's hindquarters, bit deep into muscle and grated across bone. The enormous boar's legs collapsed instantly, changing his bellows and squeals to a horrible deep shriek.

He tried to drag himself around with his front legs, but the weight of his once-powerful hindquarters was too much. Li stepped in, swung low, and sliced up under the beast's neck.

Hot blood gushed steaming into the air. Black Scratch collapsed.

Triumph was short lived. The pigs of the sty went mad, swarming in around the giant boar's corpse. Li cursed as he staggered clear, only to be met by a snarl as Lander swept his sword up from the ground and lunged at him like a striking panther. Li brought his dao up and blocked the strike, but Lander just whirled with effortless grace and struck again. This time stopping his sword cost Li ground. Lander began forcing him back toward the swarming pigs.

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Brin's face was pale with rage, and he was very nearly foaming at the mouth. "Li Chien!" he screamed. "Li Chien!" He made a wild grab for Veseene, though the old woman writhed and shifted away from him. He growled and snagged her arm and slashed his dagger threateningly through the air. "The Silk! I want the Yellow Silk now!"

Caught in his deadly dance with Lander, Li made no reply. Tycho swallowed. They'd wanted the shark angry— but maybe not this angry. He swept his gaze around the sty and found Laera. His would-be apprentice had taken refuge just inside the pigs' now-abandoned shelter, just out of Brin's sight. She gave him a grim nod of readiness. Tycho swallowed again and swept his arms up wide.

"Brin!" he roared with his most forceful voice. "You want the Yellow Silk, you bastard ? Here it is!" He brought his arms together overhead, dipped one hand into the opposite sleeve—and sang, letting music ripple out of his throat.

His fingers emerged from his sleeve clutching a glowing thread. As he swept his arms down again, the thread pulled out—and out, thickening and lengthening. Its glow

intensified, pulsing in time with his song. He drew back the arm holding the bolt.

Brin gaped and flinched. Flinging Veseene to the ground, he scrambled for safety as Tycho whipped his arm forward and hurled the bolt at the table. Radiance burst out, splashing around the sty. Brin shrieked, pigs squealed, and even Lander staggered, though he recovered with a single graceful step before Li could swing his dao.

Mosi Anu snorted derisively as the light faded. "An illusion."

Hanibaz Nassor shrugged. "Nicely done though. A good distraction."

Brin's shriek choked off. "What?" He whirled around. Halfway between the shelter and Veseene, Laera froze.

Tycho took a step forward, still singing desperately, and drew another thread from his sleeve. This time when he threw it, neither wizards nor Brin so much as flinched.

The explosion of heat and light from the real Yellow Silk knocked the wizards to the ground. It picked Brin up bodily and sent him tumbling through the muck. Tycho grinned as he raced across the sty. "That's right," he crowed. "A very good distraction!"

The force of the Silk's bolt sent Lander staggering again. This time Li was ready. He dropped his dao and hurled himself at the thug. A sharp blow knocked Lander's sword from his hand; another hammered into his injured hip. He gasped in pain. A third cracked hard across his face and sent him reeling.

It seemed supernatural grace, Li thought, wasn't quite as much good close up. "Didn't I tell you my reward was easier earned than taken, Lander?" he spat. He spun around and leaped, putting all of his weight into a kick.

His foot took Lander squarely in the chest and sent him flying into the pigs' shelter. The thug slammed into the back of it hard enough to make the whole structure shake and groan. Something snapped and the roof sagged down. Any

pigs that had lingered inside came running out with frightened squeals.

Some of them charged right over the huddled bundle that sprawled in the filth of the sty. Brin yelled, opened his eyes, and scrambled to his feet. Or tried to. Li scooped him up by his belt, swung him around twice, and flung him into the shelter after Lander. The hin screamed as he flew, twisting desperately in mid-air, but he still hit with a thump.

Li charged after him—but not into the shelter. Three posts across the front held up the rickety structure. Li hurled himself at the center one with a shout of "Hrah!" His shoulder hit the wood and cracked it in two. Inside the shelter, Brin yelped. Li whirled and slammed his foot against the nearest outside post. "Hrah!"

The post shattered. The shelter collapsed entirely. Under the roof, Li could hear Brin screeching and squealing like one of his own pigs. He spat on the ground and turned away.

Tycho's smile faded as he slid to a stop beside Laera and Veseene. His old mentor's chest was stained a deep red. "Blessed Lliira!" he groaned and slid his arms under Veseene's shaking body, lifting her into a sitting position. Laera had her gag off and was fumbling to cut her hands free. "Veseene! Are you all right?"

The old bard's eyes fluttered open. "Tycho?" she said distantly.

"I'm here."

She reached up and slapped him. "That was a rescue?" Her face trembled and she pulled him close. He gasped.

"Veseene, you're bleeding!" He pushed her back and looked at her chest. She looked down—and laughed.

"My tea, Tycho!" She reached under her shirt and pulled out a dampened pouch. Red oozed between her fingers. "It got wet when I fell!"

His mouth worked, but no sound came out. He wrapped his arms around her in a hug. "Veseene, I... "

Li squatted down beside them. "She's all right?"

"I'm all right," Veseene said irritably, pulling back to glare at the Shou. "I'm right here—"

Laera's shriek interrupted her. Tycho twisted around.

Where the second bolt from the Yellow Silk, the real bolt, had struck, the portion of the rail fence that had been his target—close enough to catch the two wizards and Brin, but not Veseene—was charred and smoldering. Wet, steaming ground, any trace of snow melted away, made a perfect circle all around it. Within the circle, Hanibaz and Mosi were picking themselves up. Hanibaz's front was covered in mud. Likewise Mosi's back, matting his fine robes against a skinny backside. The two looked at each other and almost in unison muttered spells. The mud simply slid off of them in a rain of dirt, leaving them clean and unsullied. They looked at the little group huddled within the sty.

Specifically, they looked at Tycho. "That," said Hanibaz, "was impressive. The Yellow Silk of Kuang, I presume?"

Tycho swallowed. Mosi's eyes narrowed. "Cooperate now, duel for it later, Hanibaz?" he proposed.

The bearded mage smiled. "That seems fair." The wizards moved forward as one.

Tycho eased Veseene out of his arms and stood up quickly. Li rose as well.

, A horrid coughing grunt and a chorus of porcine squeals stopped them all.

Out in the middle of the sty, Black Scratch was climbing heavily—impossibly!—to his feet. "Li?" breathed Tycho.

"I killed him!" the Shou said. "I swear I did!" The boar's bristly head turned at the sound of his voice. His dark eyes were intense. For a heartbeat, he stared at the stunned humans—

—then reared back and stood upright. Animal legs lengthened and thickened into powerful human legs and heavy arms. Hooves became hands and feet, tusks shrank to teeth, and bristles shriveled into thick hair on a broad,

muscular torso. Dark, intense eyes remained dark and intense, but folded and blinked behind almond-shaped lids. A Shou man stood where Black Scratch had been. Li gulped. "YuMao!"

CHAPTER 15

u Mao?" Tycho stared at the man the boar had become. From all that Li had said of his brother, he had built up a picture of a stern and proper Shou, elegant and dignified, a subtle, well-groomed villain. The man who glared at them had the black hair, dark eyes, and golden skin of a Shou, but the resemblance to Tycho's imagined vision of Yu Mao ended there. This man was filthy, golden skin smeared with dirt. His hair was thick and wild on his head and simply thick everywhere else. Everything about his body was thick and heavy—where Li was lean and spare, he had big muscles padded with a firm layer of fat. Like... like...

Like a boar. Like Black Scratch.

Li was staring, too, his eyes incredulous. "What ... how ... " he gasped in Shou. "What kind of magic is this?"

"The darkest magic, younger brother," the man—Yu Mao—snarled. He spat the words in

Common. He curled massive hands into fists and stepped forward. Pigs twined around his legs like happy cats. He kicked them away and stooped down to Serg's groaning, coat-shrouded form. Another kick stilled Lander's man. Yu Mao ripped Li's coat off him and knotted it around his waist, covering his nakedness. Li shook his head in astonishment.

"Yu Mao, I thought you were dead!"

"It takes more than a dao to kill me, Li Chien," growled Yu Mao.

Tycho saw Li flinch at his brother's words. Conflict and confusion burned across his face. Li spread his hands. "No! I mean, you... You're alive! Brin said... " He gestured at the collapsed shelter. Brin was still yelling from underneath and banging at the tangled wood, maybe even louder now. Yu Mao just growled again.

"I know what Brin said! And he was right. The Yu Mao you came looking for is gone. He went down with Sow. Not that it matters. I know why you came west. You want me dead one way or another—you and our father. Am I right?"

Li's breath hissed between his teeth. "You murdered the other people on the trading expedition. You've shamed Kuang—"

"So you want vengeance." Yu Mao bared teeth that shone sharp and white. "It's not going to be that easy, Li Chien." His eyes darted to the wizards, standing as still and startled as anyone. "Hanibaz! Mosi! You still want the Yellow Silk of Kuang?" A thick finger, the nail on it yellow and cracked, jabbed at Tycho. "He's yours. Take it from him and you can keep it." The finger shifted to Li. "But him. He's mine."

The wizards glanced at each other and Hanibaz shrugged. "Fair enough." They took a step back. Hani-baz's hand reached into his cloak.

Tycho choked and looked at Li. The Shou's face was pale, but the expression on it was hard. "Give them the Silk," he hissed. "Save yourself." Tycho nodded. He reached for his sleeve and his fingers closed on its astonishing warmth.

We were so close, he thought. It almost worked, we almost got away. We took down Brin and Lander and all their men—and even Hanibaz and Mosi. Red Wizards, Tycho, he reminded himself, you pulled one over on Red Wizards!

And you're going to stop fighting now?

Anger flared inside him, warm and powerful as the Silk itself. A crooked smile spread across his face and he grinned at Li. "Bind me if I will!" he spat. Li's eyes narrowed and a smile tugged on his face as well.

They moved at the same moment, Li charging at Yu Mao with a shout, Tycho whirling to dart across the sty and away from the wizards—and his aged mentor. "Laera!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Get Veseene out of here!"

Words of magic shimmered in the air. One of the wizards was working a spell. Tycho's hand went to his sleeve and the

ragged edge of the Yellow Silk, and he tugged loose another thread. It grew in his grasp, pulsing and warm. He spun around, sliding in the muck of the sty, and hurled it at the mages without pausing.

Hanibaz dived away from the glowing bolt, but Mosi stood firm. He spoke the final syllable of his spell and flung up his hands. A wispy curtain of flame flared before him, catching the Silk's bolt. Light spattered like water and Mosi staggered, but there was no explosion. Hanibaz

hissed. He reached into his cloak once more and whipped out a long, slim wand of pale wood tipped with a vivid red gem. A harsh world rippled from his lips. He flicked the wand at Tycho.

The bard didn't wait to see what unpleasant effect the wand might produce. He threw himself forward, tumbling across the ground. Hanibaz hissed in frustration. Tycho rolled to his feet, snatching another thread from the Yellow Silk as he moved, and rose with a golden bolt ready in his hand. The Red Wizards were separated now, though, too far apart for a single bolt to affect both! His gaze darted from one to the other, trying to choose a target. Mosi, readying another spell behind his veil-thin shield of magic, or Hanibaz with his wand? He lunged toward Mosi in a desperate feint—maybe he could at least startle him into dropping his spell before hurling the bolt at—

Still in his grasp, the bolt changed as he lunged, flexing and lengthening in the air. The tip of a long lash of light cracked, whiplike, against Mosi's shield with a shower of sparks. Mosi yelped and the spell that he had been weaving collapsed in on itself. Even Hanibaz jumped, wand momentarily forgotten. Tycho's own surprise gave way almost instantly to fierce, angry joy.

"Bind me, yes!" he shouted and sent the lash cracking out again, first at Mosi then at Hanibaz, driving the startled wizards back. Another snap of the lash caught the wood of the fence between him and them. Flaming splinters fell

hissing into the mud below. "Come on," he screamed defiantly. "You want the Silk? Come and take it!"

Movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Laera was struggling with Veseene, trying to drag her away from the fight—and Veseene was resisting with

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all of her feeble strength. Tycho cracked the lash at Mosi again. This time, the bald wizard stood his ground, letting his shield absorb the blow of the lash. Sparks flew once more, but Mosi didn't even flinch. Tycho swung the lash back at Hanibaz desperately. At least he could still hurt him! "Veseene, get away! Go with Laera!"

"No! You're not going to win this fight alone!" The old woman's voice was strangely thick, almost muffled.

Tycho twisted around. "Veseene, go—"

Mosi's hand flicked out. Five darts of ruddy light swarmed from his fingertips, streaking like arrows to pierce Tycho's side. The bard gasped and the lash fell from his hand, vanishing in a silent flare as pain sent him stumbling to the ground.

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Yu Mao's finger pointed at him. "He's mine."

"Fair enough," said the bearded wizard.

Li's gut squeezed down into a knot. How light had he felt when he had believed Yu Mao was dead? The weight that had been lifted from him had come crashing back, heavier than ever. Yu Mao alive—even though he had unwittingly killed him once! Now...

In the Hooded's lair, memories of happier times—of the brother he had known—had stayed his hand.

Now his brother had just offered up Tycho and the greatest treasure of their family. For what? He looked up and into Yu Mao's eyes.

All he saw there was murder and bloodlust. The same madness he had seen in Black Scratch's eyes. What kind of monster had his brother become?

Honored ancestors, give me courage, he prayed silently. Lords of Karma, judge me kindly. He tore his gaze away from Yu Mao and looked to Tycho. "Give them the Silk," he said. "Save yourself."

But the bard's face twisted into a crooked smile. "Bind me if I will!"

A smile touched Li's face, too. Thank you, honored ancestors. For what better courage could I ask?

Li forced doubt out of his mind. A fast, hard blow could end this quickly. He shouted as he turned away from Tycho and charged at his brother. He launched himself into a leap, a high-flying kick at Yu Mao's head.

With a speed that belied his barrel-chested size, Yu Mao spun aside and punched out with a blow of his own that slammed Li to the ground. Li twisted, soaking up some of the impact with a roll that brought him back up to his feet. Yu Mao was right on top of him, though, and unleashing a flurry of vicious hand strikes. Li got his arms up to block the strikes, but the ferocity of his brother's attack forced him back and brought a gasp out of him. Yu Mao smiled savagely. "Not up to the challenge, younger brother?" he grunted.

A break in the storm of his attacks. Li's arm shot out straight, stiff fingers driving into Yu Mao's thick neck. Yu Mao dodged back before they could strike. Li bared his teeth. "More than up to it, elder brother."

He threw himself forward. Yu Mao leaped to meet him, not to strike or block, but to grapple. Suddenly Li found himself fighting—really fighting—to tear himself out of his brother's embrace. Yu Mao reeked like a pig, the stink of his body enough to make Li retch. His skin was greasy with filth as well, and his near-nakedness made it difficult to grasp him. His own clothes, on the other hand, made it easy for Yu Mao to get a grip on him and hold him tight.

Massive arms squeezed and Li gasped as the air was crushed out of his lungs.

He wrenched his arms free desperately. Cupping his hands,

he clapped them against Yu Mao's ears. The big man gasped and his arms loosened. Li thrust against his shoulders, drawing his body up and out of the deadly embrace, and threw himself backward in a long flip. The heel of his boot caught Yu Mao's chin with a snap and sent him staggering back. Li landed in a crouch beside his fallen dao, swept it up, and rose into a position of balance. "Hrah!"

Blood was trickling out of Yu Mao's mouth as he stood up straight. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. "You've gotten good," he said.

Li didn't move. "And you've gotten foul. You're more pig than man." His eyes narrowed sharply as Staso's tale came back to him—along with Tycho's caution of curses as fickle things. "It's the captain's curse," he breathed. Yu Mao's eyes narrowed as well.

"So you know about that." He sneered. "By my blood, you shall not live to forget Sow. Well, I haven't forgotten her or her bitch mistress—every night when the moon rises I send a prayer to whatever hell she burns in and I thank her for her curse because it's a greater blessing than Kuang ever gave me!"

Li stiffened. "You like it?" He hissed. "You were the pig that enabled Brin to escape his part of the curse!"

Yu Mao laughed. "Black Scratch was more than anybody guessed. I was the one who recognized your dao—" Li's eyes widened and his grip on the weapon tightened.

"You couldn't have. You've never seen this dao!"

Yu Mao touched his nose. "More than anybody guessed," he growled. "I could smell you on it. I was the one who decided we should find you first. I was the one who realized you were carrying the Yellow Silk and told Brin that we should sell it."

Li could feel the heat of rage rising in his face. "The greatest treasure of our family. You betrayed—"

"I betrayed Kuang?" Yu Mao's lips drew back from his teeth.

"Yes. I did. I betrayed Kuang. I betrayed the trading

expedition. I betrayed Sow. I betrayed you to Brin!" He tossed his head at the collapsed shelter, still shaking with the hin's efforts to free himself. "I'd even betray him if it helped me!"

Li's jaw clenched. "You disgust me."

"No," snarled Yu Mao, "you disgust me! All the way from Keelung to Spandeliyon—why? To satisfy an old maris honor?"

"The honor of Kuang." Li was trembling. "My honor. Your honor!"

Yu Mao snorted. "No," he said, "not mine. I left all that behind in Shou Lung—and I wish upon that yellow rag you brought with you that it had stayed there!"

Spit flew from his mouth with the vehemence of his denial. Li's eyes went wide and the day of Yu Mao's Blessing Ceremony flared in his memory once more. It was almost beyond belief that this brute could be the same Yu Mao who had learned his etiquette and practiced his rituals with such flawless precision. Yu Mao, heir to the workshops and fortune of Kuang. Stern Yu Mao. Dignified Yu Mao. Perfect Yu Mao. Breath caught in his throat.

"Why?" he gasped.

Yu Mao's expression twisted. "You," he said, "wouldn't understand."

Behind Li, Tycho screamed suddenly. He looked over his shoulder. The bard was on the ground, his face tight

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with pain. Li looked back to Yu Mao—just in time to see his brother throw back his head and give a boarlike bellow.

All around the sty, in the corners and holes where they had jammed themselves, Brin's scattered pigs pricked up their ears. With angry squeals, they came charging out at Li. The Shou yelped and spun around, besieged. Yu Mao sprinted past him, surging through the crowded pigs and headed for the trough on the other side of the sty. He flipped it over with one hand. From underneath, he snatched out his

butterfly swords. He sneered at Li again. "I don't know how you found these," he said, "but they're the only piece of Shou Lung I've missed." He grinned at them and looked up. "Ayeh!" he spat and clashed the blades together as he brought them over his head. He lowered his arms and pushed them out slowly with a long intense breath. "Ayeh!" The weapons crossed over his chest for a heartbeat before thrusting out, then up high, then out again, then down. With each thrust Yu Mao took a stomping step forward, ending with his massive legs braced like pillars as he breathed in slow and deep. "Aayye-hhhh." The muscles of his chest expanded and flexed, and Yu Mao raised his butterfly swords up until their sharp edges pointed straight at Li.

"You shouldn't have come, brother," he rasped—and charged.

Li tried to spin out of his way, tried to dodge back, tried to do anything, but pigs battered at his legs with every step that he attempted. It was all he could do to stay on his feet among the angry, swarming animals! They darted aside for Yu Mao, though. "Ayeh /"the big man roared. Butterfly swords swept in, one following the other. Li planted his feet and whirled his dao desperately, blocking one sword, then another, and then the first again. He struck back, or tried to; Yu Mao caught the dao on the back of a sword. Li's blade grated along Yu Mao's—

—right into the hook over the butterfly sword's hilt. Yu Mao twisted, locking the dao. His other sword chopped down from above.

Li brought his arm up and Yu Mao's forearm cracked against his. Before his brother could force the sword down, Li clenched his teeth and punched sideways into his face, hard and precise. Bone cracked. Yu Mao's head snapped around. Li wrenched himself and his dao away and jumped back.

His right foot came down on a pig and the animal writhed away with a squeal of pain. Li flailed his arms, just barely regaining his balance as Yu Mao turned back to him. His

cheek was deformed, broken bone pushing it out of shape. He bared his teeth and growled, eyes narrowing for a moment in concentration.

Boar's bristles sprouted and faded in a ripple across his face. For a moment, his entire head changed shape, turning long and heavy, a pig's head on a man's body. The change vanished and Yu Mao was entirely human again. And entirely healed.

"Mother of dogs," choked Li. He brought his dao up again.

Awareness came back to Lander amid frantic slapping and a rain of curses from Brin. "Wake up! Wake up, damn you!" Lander reached over and punched at the halfling. Brin just slid back and kicked at his injured hip. Lander howled and sat up.

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His head smacked into a beam and he dropped back down. He stared around through a haze of pain. They were trapped beneath a tangle of wood in a space so low Brin could barely stand up. "We're under the shelter in the sty," the halfling snarled. "Li Chien brought it down on top of us. I don't have the leverage to move anything." He kicked at Lander's hip again. "You have to lift the roof up! I need to get out there!" Lander shifted himself away from Brin's foot. The noises coming from outside didn't sound promising: shouts, screams, and a lot of squealing pigs. There were tiny holes in the thick thatch that covered the roof of the shelter, presumably torn open by Brin. Through one, Lander could see Mosi Anu and Hanibaz Nassor. Tycho was writhing on the ground before them. Through another, he could see Li Chien as he struggled in the midst of a seething herd of pigs. Facing him was the biggest, hairiest, dirtiest Shou he had ever seen. "Who is that?" he yelped.

"Kuang Yu Mao," spat Brin. "Lift, damn—"

Kuang Yu Mao's head flowed, shifted, and for less than a heartbeat became a boar's. Black Scratch! "Bind me!"

howled Lander, shoving himself as far back into their little space as he could go. Brin reached out and slapped him again.

"We need to get out there!"

Lander slapped him right back. This time he caught him, and the force of the blow spun him around. "Bind and tar you, Brin!" Lander cursed. "I'm staying right here!"

The halfling glared at him and opened his mouth. Anything he might have said, however, was lost in a sudden, sharp yell from outside, a bellow so loud it shook straw from the broken thatch above them. Lander cursed again and covered his head.

Li felt the sudden cry all the way through his body, from his ears deep into his bones. Magic, it had to be more magic—except that whatever spell had been cast, the wizards seemed to have caught the worst of it. They were staggering, hands pressed over their ears.

He wasn't going to question a lucky break, though. The abrupt noise struck terror into the pigs, fear breaking through Yu Mao's eerie power over them. The animals scattered and ran in panic. Li ran, too. Yu Mao might call the pigs again and he wasn't going to be trapped a second time! In the corner of the sty, a wheelbarrow had been propped up between the tall, plank fence and the wall of the Eel. Li sprinted for it; leaping onto the wheelbarrow; bouncing off a stout fencepost; and vaulting onto the Eel's low, almost-flat roof. Up out of the shadows of the alley, red sunlight caught him, the last light of the day. He dashed away from the edge of the roof and whirled around.

With shocking grace, Yu Mao—following the same route—leaped up onto the roof as well. "Ayeh!" he screamed, shaking his swords.

"Hrah!" shouted Li. His dao flashed bloody light as he whirled toward his brother.

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A second volley of Mosi's darts stabbed into Tycho and he

writhed with the agony that wracked his body. The Yellow Silk winked at him from his sleeve. A bolt. A lash. Anything to deliver swift retribution to the mage! He stretched and reached, but it seemed as if his arms wouldn't obey him. When he tried to move them, they flopped about like long eels squirming in the bottom of a boat. He looked up. Hanibaz, wand at the ready, and Mosi, still veiled by his fiery shield, were stepping warily closer. Tycho groaned and forced himself to his knees. "Stay back!" he said. Some strength flowed back into his arms and he raised them threateningly. "Stay back or—"

"Or what?" laughed Hanibaz. "What are you going to do to us, bard? " He lifted his wand.

The roaring, musical shout that blasted them was so loud that the force of it swept debris along the ground and set Mosi's robes flapping, so loud that it was an almost-visible rippling in the air. Even on the edge of that power, Tycho howled and covered his ears. Within it, Mosi and Hanibaz were sent staggering. When the shout ended a heartbeat later, their ragged screams filled the seeming silence. He stared at them. What... ?

"Tycho!"

A voice filled with music and maybe just a hint of the power that had blasted the wizards called his name. A voice he hadn't heard speak with that strength in two years or more. He whirled around.

Veseene stood on the table as if it were a stage. She stood strong and proud, a hand on Laera's shoulder for balance only. Her body trembled, not with palsy, but with a charged and vibrant energy, like a tuning fork that had just been struck. "Tycho!" she called again.

Her mouth was stained red. A pouch, likewise stained red, lay at her feet. The tea pouch. Empty. Laera's eyes were stunned and frightened.

No wonder Veseene's voice had seemed muffled when he had ordered her to run. No wonder she had fought Laera to

stay.

She'd eaten the raw, wet tea herbs at full strength.

A moan forced itself out of Tycho's throat. He staggered to his feet. "Veseene, what have you done?"

"Tycho!" she said a third time, a note of command creeping into her voice. "Come here! Do you have your strilling?"

Numbly, he nodded and slid the instrument around from his back. It had acquired a few fresh scratches and one of the tuning pegs was cracked, but a strilling was a sturdy instrument. Veseene smiled and power gleamed in her eyes.

"Then come here! I need you!"

She straightened herself, held her head high and began to sing with a force that seemed impossible for her frail bo'dy. Tycho froze, caught up in the beauty and strength of her song. It pulled on him like the moon on the tide, a wild and liquid music. Magic swirled among the notes. Even when he'd first met her, before the palsy had set in, he'd never heard Veseene sing like this! For a moment, he could picture her as she must have been at the very height of her power. Veseene the Lark, magic flowing like a second voice in her song.

Then she hit—very briefly—a false note. Her voice, her song, faltered for just a heartbeat.

The clash of metal on metal broke into the music. Tycho whirled. Up on the rooftop of the Eel, Li fought with Yu Mao. Butterfly swords fell in unison against dao. Li staggered.

"Tycho!" called Laera. "Tycho!"

Veseene needed him. But so did Li.

Tycho tugged the Yellow Silk out of the sleeve of his coat. Golden light flashed in the sty as he unfolded it a little bit, just enough that he could snatch up a rock and wrap it in the brilliant fabric. He darted forward. "Li!" he shouted—and hurled the rock-weighted Silk up onto the roof. It shone in its arc like a shooting star. With a

whispered prayer that Li got to it first, he turned his back, set his strilling against his shoulder, and pulled his bow from

the strap.

Bow on string brought music echoing out of simple wood. He found the note that Veseene had missed and threw it back to her, pure and sweet. Her voice caught it and sent it ringing into the gathering night, her song restored. Tycho picked up the melody as she sang, improvising a harmony to accompany it. He walked back toward her, taking up a position beside her makeshift stage. Magic—Veseene's magic—wrapped around him. It tingled across his skin and in the tips of his fingers, a thrill that sank deep inside him and brought shivers to the pit of his stomach. Laera could feel it, too. Tycho could see the wonder in her face. He smiled at her—

—a smile that slipped a bit as another voice joined their song. A deep and powerful voice, soft but cold, a chilling susurrantion. The shiver in him turned to a shudder. He glanced up at Veseene. Her face glowed with exaltation and confidence. And control. Whatever this new voice was, she had called it. He swallowed his fear and played. >

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Old Veseene's singing was amazing. Lander had frozen, listening in wonder, as soon as her voice took flight. And he had laughed at her weakness the previous night? If he got out of this, he was going to be making some deep, deep apologies!

Brin was still raging at the wood and thatch that trapped them, barely aware, it seemed, of Veseene's music. Li Chien and Yu Mao had taken their fight to the roof and Brin seemed determined to join them. Lander could hear the sound of swords from high above, but there was nothing to see.

Other figures were stirring out in the gathering shadows, though. Lander's teeth ground together as he peered through the ragged gap in the thatch. Hanibaz and Mosi were finally shaking off the effects of whatever magic Veseene—it could only have been Veseene—had blasted

them with. Hanibaz had his wand out. Lander felt an urge to shout out to Veseene and Tycho, to warn them. The two bards seemed completely caught up in their music and entirely unaware of the recovering wizards.

But Hanibaz hopped suddenly from one foot to the other, looking at the ground and cursing. Mosi looked down, too, and hissed audibly. The veil of flames around him winked out. Lander sat forward, peering through the gap and trying to see whatever it was they saw.

His knees came down in a pool of ice-cold water. He gasped and rocked back again. Outside, Mosi called out a word and bright light flared.

It flashed across dark water. Rapidly rising dark water. Lander's knees weren't the only things wet now. The water was rising in the collapsed shelter as surely as it was outside. "Brin!"

The ranting halfling was standing on a sloping board. He turned around and slipped, hitting the water with a solid splash—and a scream so loud the water might have been boiling! He leaped for Lander. "It's the sea!" he shrieked "The sea is rising! Get us out!"

This time there was no point in protesting. Whatever dangers there might be outside, they were preferable to drowning in a pigsty! Lander sloshed around in the water—it had filled a third of their little space in just

moments—getting his legs under himself and bracing his arms against the fallen roof. He heaved. It didn't budge.

"Harder!" shouted Brin. He was back on his sloping board, huddled desperately as high above the water as he could get without clinging to the roof itself. His eye was wild. Lander glared at him.

"You could help!"

Brin hissed like a wet cat and whipped a nasty little knife out of his belt. "Lift!" he spat. "Or you won't have to worry about drowning!"

Lander stared at the knife, then at the wild-eyed halfling,

and heaved again, straining with all his strength.

Icy water soaked into his wounded hip. His leg spasmed. He went over, slipping under the water. He righted himself hastily, shaking water out of his hair, and thrust as hard as he could against the roof. The water was at his belly now. "Wait," Brin said desperately, "it's wood, right? Wood will float, won't it? You'll be able to lift it then."

"It's thatch over the wood," growled Lander. "When it's wet, it's heavier!"

Brin wailed. Lander cursed as he slammed his shoulder against the roof. The water was at his chest—his shoulders. It clamped him in cold. Through the narrow gap, he could see pigs struggling in the water. Terrified squeals and shrieks echoed around Veseene's song. Brin wailed louder with each one. "Be quiet!" Lander yelled finally. "Be quiet!" There was another sound in the air—the alarmed shouts of men. Who ... ? Lander bent down and peered through the very corner of the gap. Men were stirring at the far side of the sty. The extra thugs Brin had called in, the ones that Tycho had put to sleep with a single spell—the cold water was waking them.

"Hey!" he screamed. "Over here! Help us! Help us!"

The only response he got was a frightened glance. Most of the men took one look at the wizards and the singing bard, and waded quickly through the waters toward the door into the Eel. The first one heaved it open—and was met by a wave of water. The festhall was flooded, too! The water in the sty rose sharply. The thugs yelled and struggled on, making their escape.

Veseene kept singing.

"Li!" Tycho's shout drew Li's attention. He spun away from Yu Mao and looked.

A shining light flashed up out of the alley like a comet, bright fabric a flickering tail. Li hissed. The Yellow Silk! He lunged toward it.

But Yu Mao had heard the shout and seen the light as well.

He leaped forward, landing in a crouch and bringing his leg up in a sweeping kick that caught Li in the belly. The blow sent him flying backward across the pitch of the roof. Slates cracked and skittered under him, the broken edges shredding his clothes and slicing into his back. He gasped, and gasped again.

The Yellow Silk, given weight by whatever Tycho had wrapped it around, hit the roof and bounced. The fabric fell loose and a stone fell out to roll over the edge. The Silk slid to a limp stop, alone and ignored. He twisted toward it—and Yu Mao sprang at him.

Li pushed back hard against the roof and flipped up to his feet, dao meeting butterfly blades with a discordant ring. He twisted away from the block and stepped higher onto the slope of the roof, trying to get around Yu Mao. His brother flung out an arm and a sword. Li parried, knocking the blow aside, but another hard blow followed. "Ayeh!" shouted Yu Mao. "Ayeh! Ayeh!" Each blow forced Li a little farther away from the Yellow Silk and a little higher on the roof until he was straddling its very peak.

The sun was under the horizon now. Purple twilight lay across Spandeliyon—Li could see across the waterfront and most of dockside. Down in the shadows, there was music. Tycho's strilling. And a song, a beautiful song. Veseene! The power of her music spread out into the night like the wind of a storm.

Some small part of that power touched him, too, surging through his heart and blood. Li drew a deep breath and clenched his fist tight around his dao as Yu Mao stepped up to the ridge of the roof. His eyes were narrow and hard. His butterfly swords were raised for a killing blow.

Li looked at his brother. "Why?" he asked again. "Why throw everything away to join pirates? Why murder the expedition from Keelung when you could have been first among them?"

Yu Mao's reply hissed between his teeth. "Because I was tired of being the first among them!" Li froze. Yu Mao's face

writhed with hate and anger. "I said you wouldn't understand! Younger children never do! What was the name of Kuang for you? Something to be proud of, a key to open doors. For me it was the lock on a prison." Butterfly swords slashed the air. "Always perfect, always the heir. When you're older, Yu Mao, you must do this. When you lead the family, you must do that. This will be your house. Mei will be your wife. And what was there to do but nod and obey? I was the responsible elder son of Kuang, molded by the family, the traditions of eighteen generations of elder sons pressing down on me

from dawn to dusk and in all but my deepest dreams."

He pointed a steady sword at Li. "No more. All my dreams are free. Now I'm the first generation!"

"Yu Mao—"

"What do you know of the weight of family, Li Chien?"

Li's jaw tightened. "Family," he said, "sent me to kill my brother." Yu Mao sneered—and thrust out, thrust high, the butterfly swords cutting deadly, spreading arcs through the air.

"Ayeh!"

Li swayed away from one flashing blade and swept his dao up against the other. His empty hand punched forward, forcing Yu Mao to dodge back. He whirled around, swinging the dao with all of his strength. "Hrah!" Yu Mao got a sword up. It turned the blow, but only barely. Yu Mao staggered and Li pressed him, swinging again. "Hrah!"

His brother dropped. Both butterfly swords came up this time. Straight up, the hooks along their backs catching the dao. Yu Mao twisted his massive forearms and the blades locked together. He stared up at Li. "When you see our honored ancestors," he said, "let them know I won't be joining them."

With a heave of his shoulders, he wrenched the dao away and sent it plunging over the edge of the roof. Yu Mao surged back to his feet. Li flung himself aside as the

butterfly swords chopped down.

The water rose fast. Tycho hopped up onto the bench beside the table, and onto the table itself with Veseene and Laera, trying to stay ahead of it. Still playing, he stared in amazement as Veseene's song brought a flood into the

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sty and the alley. Hanibaz and Mosi weren't just staring, though. For a single moment as Mosi called up magelights and they saw what Veseene had done, they were, perhaps, startled, but then each mage cast a spell. Hanibaz spoke a word, spread his arms, and soared up into the air above the flood. Mosi spoke a different word and spun his finger in a circle. The water before him calmed and flattened into a disc—he stepped up and forward, standing firmly atop the water. Their eyes shining in the magelights, the wizards turned to the trio caught on the table. Hanibaz's wand rose. Tycho swallowed. Grouped together with nowhere to go, they were an easy target! "Veseene!"

His old mentor's eyes crinkled. She raised an arm. Her song changed.

The other voice that had joined her song, the chill susurrant of waves crashing against rocks, surged to a crescendo. Behind Mosi, the floodwaters began to froth and churn. The wizard spun around just as they rose up into a dark, swirling column. He gaped. Hanibaz, whirling in midair, gaped. Tycho gaped, too.

Magelights made bright reflections on the column's surface. The reflections blinked. Jets of water erupted from the column and swept out like arms.

Hanibaz swooped around, diving away from the elemental's watery grasp. Mosi, however, pointed his hand at the arm that reached for him and shouted a word. Fire roared out in a scorching path and the creature's limb hissed away in a cloud of steam. A shriek like a storm crossing the open sea burst out of the elemental and it seemed to sway and shrink back. Veseene's eyes narrowed and she poured new force

into her song. Hastily, Tycho picked up the intensity on his strilling, adding to her voice. The elemental surged back to its full height. A new arm emerged and lashed out. Mosi flinched and almost stumbled off his disc before gasping out another spell. A veil of fire swept around him once more. The elemental hissed and recoiled.

Hanibaz came about in the air, his cloak whipping with the breeze of his passage, and dived back at the creature. His wand flicked and the red stone in it flashed. For a moment, the same red light flickered through the elemental, and it shuddered. The dark water swallowed the light. Both arms crashed up at Hanibaz. The mage dipped and swooped desperately.

Over the wash of surging waters, the shouts of the mages, and the music of his own strilling, Tycho heard another cry. He looked up and saw metal flash through magelight as Li's dao plunged down into the swirling floodwaters. Up on the Eel's roof, two figures struggled. "Veseene," he shouted. "Li needs help, too!"

Veseene looked up. Tycho saw her tense. The fingers of her raised hand opened wide and her song rose with the power of an entire choir. Like a woman gathering her skirts, the elemental turned and swirled. Water surged after it, flowing up and into its liquid form, adding to its bulk.

And it grew. The arms that pursued Hanibaz Nassor swelled—an entire river of water snaked across the sky and swatted him out of the air. He slammed down hard into the already collapsed and partially submerged pig shelter. Mosi Anu cried out as the water grabbed his disc and sucked him right into the elemental's body.

Likewise caught in the pull of the rushing waters, the entire Eel shifted and lurched. On its shuddering roof, Li and Yu Mao staggered apart.

The impact of Hanibaz Nassor did what Lander had been unable to do: the roof of the collapsed shelter folded under

his falling body, lifting up a full foot above the water at its near end. Magelight flooded in. Hanibaz lay halfsubmerged among the wreckage caused by his crash. Lander stretched over and hauled the wizard's head up out of the water. His eyes flickered briefly. "Brin," Lander called against the sudden roar of the water elemental outside, "he's still alive!" The halfling unwrapped himself from the post he had been clinging to and looked at the barely conscious wizard. He flicked his one-eyed gaze to the gap above the water. With an unholy cry, he swarmed through the beams of the broken roof and squirmed out, flipping up on top of the roof. "Brin!" Lander yelled. He gave Hanibaz a push that rolled him out of danger of drowning and half-swam through the water over to the gap.

New light—golden light—flared like dawn as he stuck his head out through the gap. He squinted against it and looked up.

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The water elemental that swelled up abruptly above them shook even Yu Mao. His swords hesitated in their fall and Li rolled aside. Not enough! Yu Mao's eyes snapped back to him and he swung his weapons sharply.

The Eel shook as the water elemental turned. Thrown off balance, Yu Mao staggered. His butterfly swords chopped down into slate. Li staggered, too, though, slipping to one knee and sliding across the shaking roof.

Loose slates clattered past him as he slipped and spun.

Light flashed in the periphery of his vision. He twisted around.

The Yellow Silk hung by a fold of fabric that had become wedged between two slates.

He looked up. Yu Mao was crouched a few feet higher on the roof. Their eyes met and Li's heart twisted one final time. "Yu ... " he breathed. His brother snarled and lunged. Li scrambled for the Silk, snatching it free, and letting it unfurl

as he rolled to his feet.

Sunlight caught by weavers and dyers in ancient times shone out as bright as the day it had been captured. It blazed across the night of Spandeliyon, turning the dark floodwaters blue-gray and the writhing column of the water elemental green and froth white. Li held the Yellow Silk high and the pride of Kuang rippled like a hundred summer days. Yu Mao's charge thundered on the Eel's roof. Li whirled toward him, the Silk billowing out in his hand.

"Ayeh!"

Yu Mao's butterfly swords sliced down. Their edges met the Silk—and slashed the shining fabric into ragged ribbons. Its light winked out.

Most of it. Yu Mao met Li's eyes again. They both looked down. One last shining bolt was clenched in Li's hand, plucked from the Yellow Silk of Kuang and hidden behind the rippling fabric.

Its other end pierced Yu Mao's chest. Li opened his hand and the bolt of light vanished. Yu Mao's eyes rolled back. Li watched his brother crumple backward. Smoke curled from the edges of a wound that showed no sign of healing.

The Yellow Silt • 900

Up on top of the shelter roof, Brin let out a wordless cry as the big Shou fell. Twisting around, Lander could just see the halfling's face blotched white and red with rage. His entire body trembled and his hands clenched into tight fists, his right squeezing his little knife so hard that blood oozed between his fingers.

Lander choked and flinched back into shadow.

Brin screamed again and whirled around. His right hand flicked out—

At the first scream, Tycho turned, still playing along to Veseene's song. Brin was standing on the roof of the collapsed shelter, staring up at Li and Yu Mao's fallen body. The bard caught his breath. "Ves—"

Brin screamed again and this time he whirled around, one

hand flicking out. Tycho caught the flash of a knife streaking toward him before he could duck or even flinch—
—and suddenly he was playing alone as the elemental collapsed in a rushing cascade and the floodwaters began to drain away.

He turned. His bow froze on the strings of his strilling. Veseene hung in Laera's arms, her faded blue eyes still wide, her mouth still open, her expression still exalted.

Brin's knife stuck out of her skull, embedded up to its hilt just behind her left temple.

Laera stared at Veseene then up at him, and a horrible high whimper shivered out of the young woman's throat as she sank to the ground, Veseene's body clutched to her. Li was calling something from the rooftop of the Eel. Tycho couldn't really hear him. The blood in his ears was rushing too loud. His strilling fell from his hand and slid down to hang at his side. His bow clattered to the tabletop and splashed into the receding water below. He turned back around. Slowly.

Brin still stood on the broken roof of the shelter, one-eyed gaze glittering in the magelight. The halfling looked around at the destruction of the flood, at the bodies of pigs that hadn't managed to swim away, at the bodies of the men killed fighting. He smiled. Savagely. "You stupid dock rat!" he howled. "You want me? You want me? " He pounded a hand against his chest. "You can't take me! You killed Yu Mao—I killed Veseene. And that's just a start!"

He leaped down from the shelter into water that was now barely waist deep on him and splashed toward the table. His eye shone with madness. "You're going to wish—"

Music, magic, and rage twisted together inside Tycho's heart and he sang. Sound buffeted Brin and sent ripples across the water all around him. The halfling staggered, sloshing sideways. His gaze met Tycho's and he staggered on. "You're going to wish," he continued, "that you had never met me. That you had never met her" His head jerked at Veseene.

"No one beats me!" He pounded his chest again. "I beat them. Just like I beat you. Like I beat the curse of Sow!" His hands slapped the surface of the water, splashing Tycho. "Not even the sea can take me! Not a pig around but I'm still alive. I outsmarted the—"

Tycho blasted him again. This time the surface of the water jumped and when Brin looked up, blood was oozing out of his nose. He stared at Tycho. "Is that the best you can do?" He surged forward through the water.

The Yellow Silk • 301

New songs come where you learn them. Veseene's words.

Tycho tipped his head back and drew a deep breath, focusing his mind, focusing his magic—focusing his song. He looked down at Brin and sang a new song. New to him at least. Veseene had been a teacher to the end.

A chill voice answered his song. It wasn't the deep voice that Veseene had commanded, but it didn't need to be. The water behind Brin frothed and surged. The halfling spun around, staring, as an elemental no larger than he was reared up out of the darkness, seized him with liquid limbs, and swept him down into cold seawater. Brin let out a squealing scream—a scream that ended in an explosion of bubbles. Tycho leaned out, watching Brin's struggles and singing until no more bubbles came up.

CHAPTER 16

Tycho ? " The bard looked up as Li climbed down from the roof of the Eel. Li's back was torn and bloody. There were bruises across his face, and he limped as he waded across the water-logged sty. He wore his own coat again. Tycho couldn't imagine it would smell very good after being wrapped around Yu Mao's filthy body, but then he probably didn't smell very good himself.

Li's dao had landed blade-first in the mud. He wrenched it free in passing, washing off the muck by the simple expedient of swishing it through the last of the floodwater. His scabbard was floating under the table. Tycho swung

down, grabbed it, and handed it to him. The Shou shook the water out of it and shoved the dao in. "That'll rust," Tycho pointed out.

"I'll clean it later. We should go." Li stared at Brin's pale, wet corpse.

Tycho nodded and turned back to the table.

Laera still knelt atop it, her arms wrapped around Veseene. Tycho took the body from her gently, propping Veseene upright as he closed her staring eyes and eased Brin's knife from her head. He looked away as it came free and hurled it as far from him as he could.

There was a ripping sound. When he looked back, Laera was binding a sleeve from her shirt around Veseene's head, hiding the wound. He smiled at her and lifted Veseene awkwardly in his arms.

"Do you want me to carry her?" Li offered.

"No." He turned and took a last look around then followed Li and Laera through what remained of the sty's rail fence.

On the other side, Mosi Anu was struggling to his feet, water running in streams from his robes. He glared at them and started to say something. "Don't," said Li. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of rags. No, Tycho realized, not rags. The remains of the Yellow Silk of Kuang. Still fine fabric, still an extraordinary yellow, but no longer glowing. If he were to hold the scraps, Tycho suspected, he would feel only cool, damp silk instead of the warm energy he had felt before. Mosi looked at the scraps and frowned—then snorted.

"Ruined," he said dourly. He stepped back and shook out his cloak, swirling the wet cloth around him. He vanished in a puff of smoke that smelled of dung fires and wet wool. The magelights hanging over the alley winked out as well, leaving only the rising moon to light the shadows.

"What about the other mage?" asked Laera.

"Hanibaz?" Tycho looked back toward the collapsed shelter. It was hard to see, but none of the shadows there looked

man-shaped. "I think he's gone, too. He wouldn't stick around for nothing either."

Li grunted, nodding to the shelter as well. "What about Lander? He was under there."

"Dead or fled, I don't care." Tycho turned away, splashing on through the alley. Laera came with him and, after a moment, Li followed.

They stepped out of the alley and into the street, turning back toward Bakers Lane. They didn't get far. At the very first crossroads, torchlight flared. "What—?" Tycho gasped as city guards came pouring into the intersection from every direction, swords drawn and ready. He froze.

'Mard Dantakain stepped out from among his men and women. The captain of the guard was covered in soot. A fresh burn shone red and raw on his face. "Tychoben Arisaenn and Kuang Li Chien, you are under arrest."

"For?" snarled Tycho.

"Kidnapping," Mard said coldly, "and murder. I went to your rooms looking for my daughter and I found my brother." His eyes were very hard. "I don't think even Magistrate Vanyan will listen to your explanations this time."

"He should," said Laera. Tycho stared as the young woman slipped around him to confront her father. "Tycho and Li haven't done anything."

Mard's hard eyes narrowed. He nodded at two of his men. "Take her home."

"No!" Laera held her chin high, and her voice was defiant. "I ran away. Tycho was looking out for me. And Uncle Jacerryl was killed by a halfling named Brin over a bag of beljurils."

"Brin?" Mard's eyes managed to grow even narrower, darting from Laera to Tycho then Li, finally settling on Veseene. Laera spoke again before he could say anything more.

"Brin killed her, too. He kidnapped her and left Uncle Jacerryl. He would have killed all of us if Tycho and Li hadn't stopped him."

Mard looked back to Tycho. "And Brin is now... ?"

"Dead," Tycho said bluntly.

"So this story about beljurils is entirely your word."

"No, it isn't." Laera reached into her belt, pulled out a velvet bag, and dumped its contents into the palm of her hand. Mard stared at the winking gems and even his eyes went wide for a moment, and he scowled. His voice dropped low so none of the guards would hear.

"Give those to me, Laera, and go home."

She closed her hand over the gems. "Not until you let Tycho and Li go," she murmured back.

"They're under arrest!"

"For what? They didn't do anything. The magistrate won't hold them. You taught me the law yourself."

Mard's eyes narrowed again. "Who killed Brin?"

Laera's eyes narrowed just like her father's. "I did." Mard clenched his jaw. Laera raised her eyebrows and smiled thinly. "Or maybe not. You can put me before the magistrate if you like—or you can take my word that Tycho and Li didn't do anything and let them go." She clenched her fist over her heart. "Tyr's truth, father. They're heroes."

"Laera... "

Laera took a deep breath and met his gaze. "Let them go and I'll come home."

Tycho couldn't hold back a startled gasp. Laera twisted around and looked back at him.

"I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you, Tycho," she said. "But I don't belong on the road. My place is here." Her smile faltered. "Like in the story of Dain and Eiter."

Tycho caught the meaning in her words. She was giving herself up for them. He gave her a crooked smile. "You would have made a fine apprentice," he said. Mard choked at his words. Tycho's grin grew just a bit and he added, "Let's hope no one cuts off your hand."

Mard choked again and whirled around. "Dismissed," he shouted sharply to his guards. "Return to stations." As the guards dispersed, he turned back to Laera with a glower. "So

you have a brain after all," he sighed. "You chose a fine time to use it." He took her hand and held her close—then glared at Tycho and Li over her head and growled, "Get out of Spandeliyon."

"Father!" Laera protested. Tycho hissed at her and met Mard's gaze.

"A day to bury the dead," he said.

"Granted. Then I don't want to see you again." He looked at Li. "Either of you."

Li snarled at him in Shou. Mard glanced at him. "He said 'yes,'" Tycho lied.

Mard glared at them once more before stalking off. Laera tried to look back, but he held her firmly.

Then they were alone. Tycho sighed and held Veseene's frail body close. A day. It didn't seem long enough.

"What now, Tycho?" asked Li. The bard sighed again and looked up. He nodded along one of the cross-streets.

"There's a cemetery inland behind high town," he said. "I know a priest there. He'll take her in. Tonight even."

"I meant after," said the Shou. "You can't stay here. Even without Mard Dantakain, you've made enemies of two wizards and the Hooded today."

Tycho smiled crookedly. "Now you know why I didn't protest leaving Spandeliyon." He shifted Veseene in his arms and began walking toward high town. "I don't really know where I'll go. Around. It doesn't really matter. New stories, new songs. I still haven't been to Waterdeep and there's that 'vigorous harp' technique to try out there!"

Li fell into step beside him. "I'll be going back to Keelung. I need to tell my father what happened here." His hand twitched toward the pocket that held the scraps of the Yellow Silk. Tycho winced.

"Li, I'm sorry about the Silk."

"I'll give it back to my father. The master weavers of Kuang may be able to repair it." Li looked down at Veseene's still form. "Your loss can't be remade. I'm more sorry for that."

"Thanks." Tycho kissed his old friend's cheek. "She died with a song on her lips. I think her spirit is still singing."

Li smiled. "You know," he said, "the ship I came on should still be in the harbor. I'll be taking it back to Telflamm and starting east along the Golden Way once spring comes. Would you like to come with me?"

Tycho choked. "Bind me, yes!" His face crinkled. "I don't have much coin for passage, though."

"You can earn it." Li opened his coat and dipped his hand inside. There was the sharp rip of cloth. Tycho twisted around to stare. Li's hand emerged, unfolding to show three stones that gleamed black-red in the moonlight. "But here's a start."

"Li!"

"Your reward, remember? For helping me."

"I couldn't take—" Li's eyebrow rose. Tycho sighed. "All right, I can take it. Bind me, you're starting to know me too well!" He looked sideways at the Shou. "Li?"

"Yes?"

"Do I really speak Shou like a whore?"

Li looked up at the moon. "You have an accent," he said diplomatically. "We can work on it." He glanced back down.

"Tycho?"

"Yes?"

"What's Thayan pox?"

11SP

EPILOGUE

Lander shivered in the cold darkness of his prison, blankets wrapped around him, waiting. How long, he wondered. Soon. Surely soon. His stomach had been growling for an eternity. The hatch in the bottom of the door popped open. Lander darted forward eagerly.

Except it wasn't a bowl of food that appeared. A rope slithered through the door like a snake. He yelped and leaped back, but the rope was faster. It shot forward, twining first around his ankles to send him sprawling then around

his wrists to hold him helpless.

As soon as he was securely bound, the door opened and Hanibaz Nassor walked in. Lander spat at him. The bearded mage just stepped aside. "Lander," he chided him, "remember, you accepted my help freely."

Brin's hand had flicked out—hurling his knife at Veseene, killing her. And Tycho had gone as mad

as Brin. Pressing himself back into the collapsed shelter, Lander had felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to stare at Hanibaz's battered face. "You helped me," the mage had slurred, "let me help you." He had held out his hand. Lander had hesitated only a moment and seized it.

A word from Hanibaz and they had been here. Or at least he had. A prisoner of the mage. At least he had blankets and food. And he only had to put up with a little poking.

Hanibaz rolled him onto his side and tugged down his trousers to inspect the wound on his hip, touching it gently. The pressure of his finger stung, and Lander hissed. It was nothing compared to that first night after the spell that the mage had cast in the sty wore off. Lander had thought he was going to die from the pain. It had passed quickly, though, and if the wound Black Scratch had inflicted was taking its sweet time healing, at least it didn't hurt so much.

"Well?" he snarled at Hanibaz.

"There will be most likely be a scar."

"I don't care about that! You know what I mean!"

"If you mean is it healing, then yes. It is."

"It would probably heal faster in a proper bedchamber," Lander pointed out. As usual, Hanibaz said nothing, just stood up and stepped to the door. Lander cursed at him. "A potion, then? You're a mage, you must have a simple healing potion lying around."

Hanibaz walked out and shut the door behind him. As soon as it was closed, the rope fell off of Lander and went slithering through the hatch. A moment later, a bowl of food slid through in its place. Savory aromas tempted Lander's

nostrils. Beef tonight. Good meat. He held himself back from the food, though, and yelled after Hanibaz.

The Yellow Silk • 111

"Whatever you're doing to me, I wish you'd hurry up with it! I've never been this hungry in my life, and I swear my hair is growing faster than this wound is healing!"

A little window he had never noticed before popped open high up in the door and Hanibaz peered through. "It most likely is."

Lander cursed again as he pulled up his trousers. "Damn you, what are you doing to me? "

"Why, nothing at all. You're healing all by yourself."

"What?" Lander clenched his fists. "If you're not healing me, why are you keeping me in here?"

"Because our friend Black Scratch may have passed something on to you."

"Passed something... " Lander staggered back and sat down hard. He landed right on his slowly healing wound but barely noticed. Black Scratch. Yu Mao. A boar that became a man—a man who became a boar. "A wereboar?" Lander choked. "Black Scratch was a wereboar?" Stories said a wereboar could pass its curse on to people who survived its attacks. "Bitch Queen's mercy." Lander looked back up at Hanibaz. "Am I going to catch the curse?"

Hanibaz's eyes twinkled. "I certainly hope so!"

The little window slid shut. Lander stared at it for a moment then he threw himself at the door, pounding on it and screaming after the Red Wizard, "No! No!"

110 • Finn RaecinrvfVtVArail-A